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JOE BUCK
Welcome to
MY bracket

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Sporting News

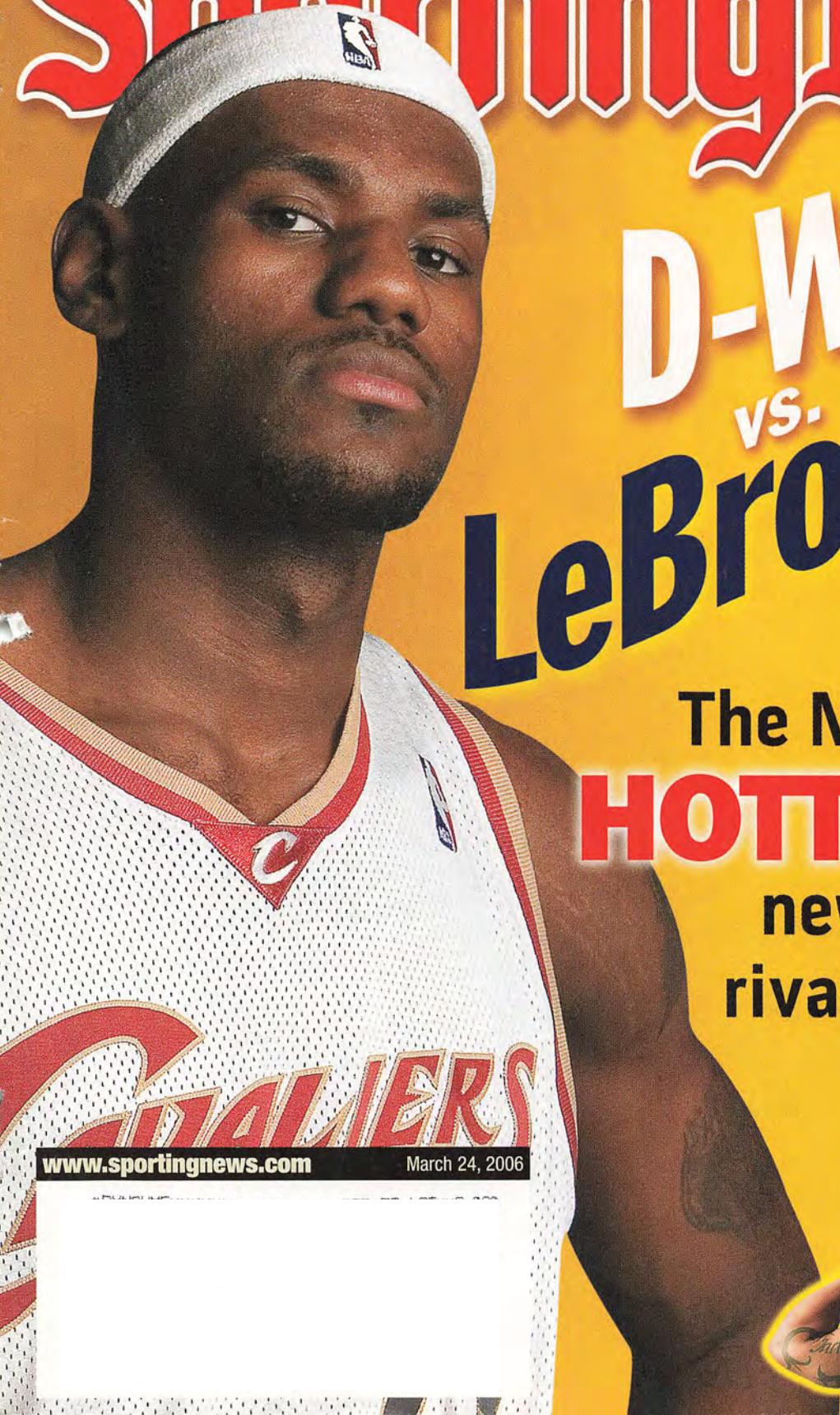
D-Wade

vs.

LeBron

The NBA's
HOTTEST

new
rivalry



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March 24, 2006



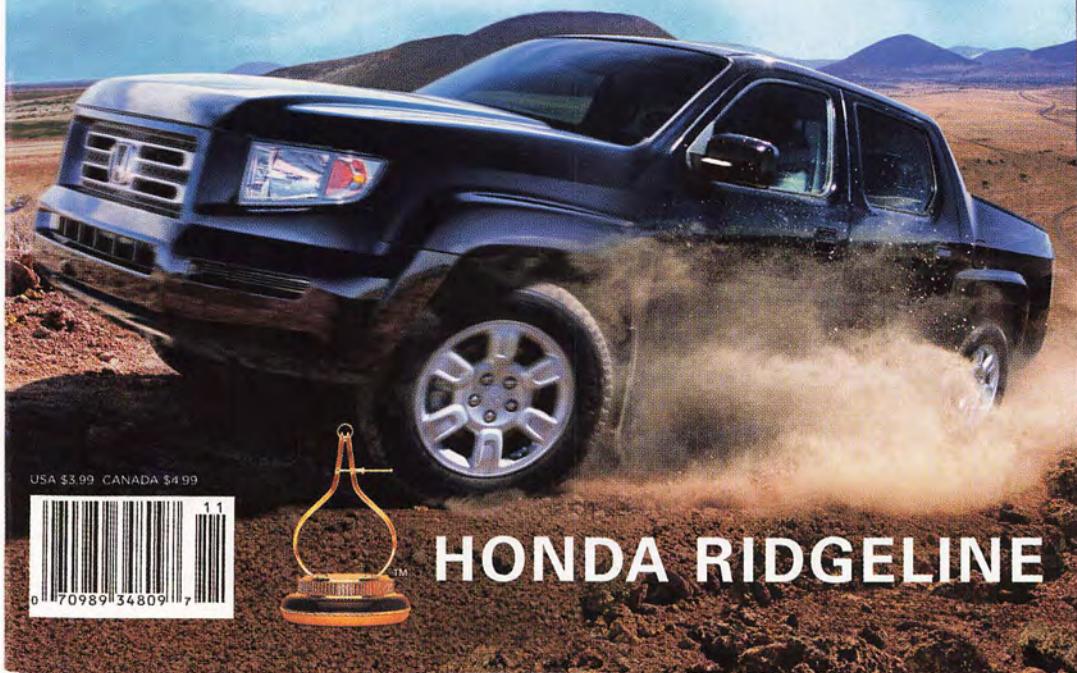
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THIS WEEK

> COLLEGE BASKETBALL: NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

12 Going once ... going twice

UConn is the only team with the resources to put a winning bid on the NCAA hardware—but that doesn't mean the Huskies will take it home. By Mike DeCourcy

18 March magnets

Duke and Connecticut rarely cross paths, but when they get drawn together, count on a full-scale clash with full-blown consequences. By Mike DeCourcy

20 The bracket racket

We give you more than the field of 65. Get ready for the NCAAs with an overview of the tournament—from start to finish—and a region-by-region rundown.

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28 Breaking in—and breaking out

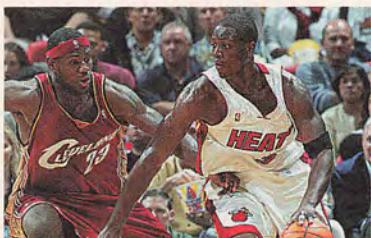
They are future stars. Every team has at least one, and each division has a guy capable of changing the balance of power. By MLB correspondents

COVER STORY > NBA

34 Better rivals

The Next Big Thing is here. Dwyane Wade and LeBron James are ready to give the league its best dueling duo in years.

By Ira Winderman

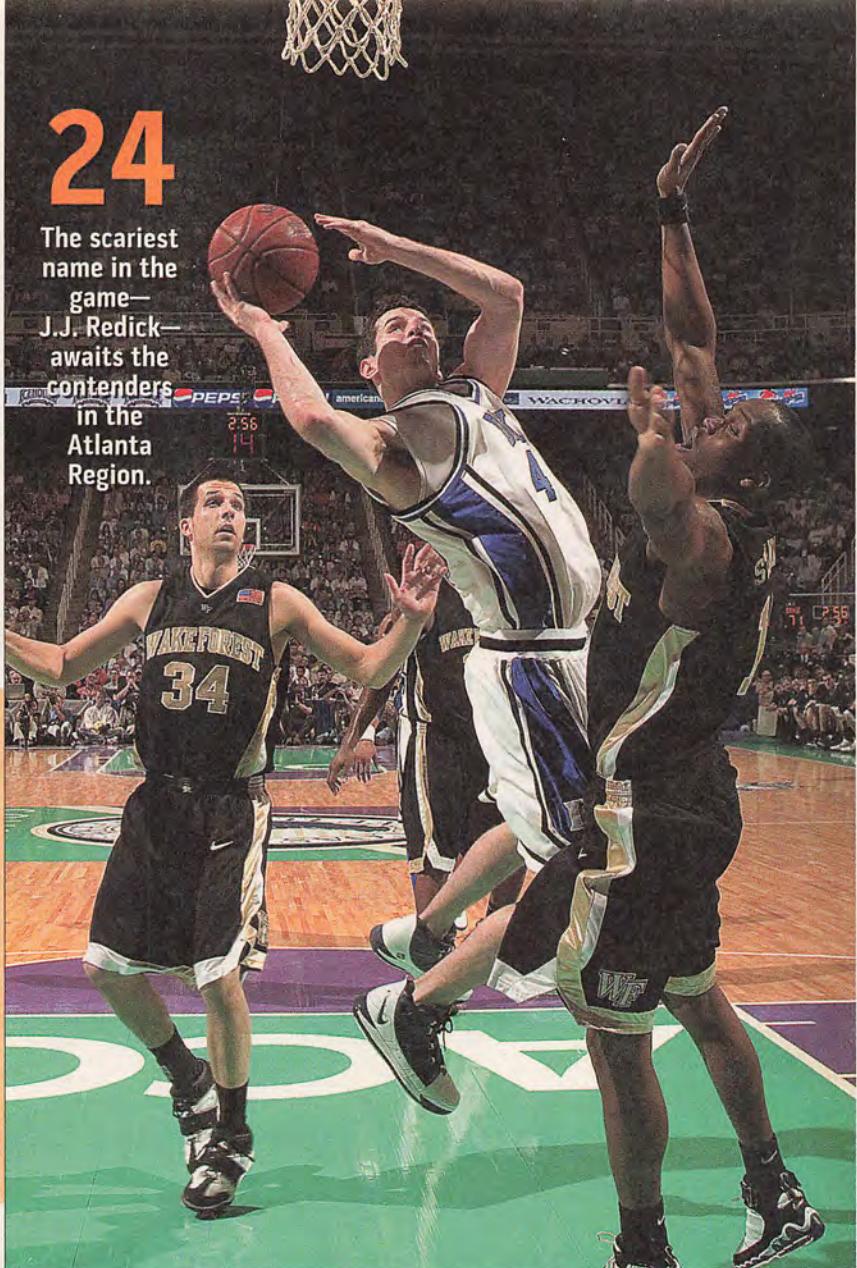


COVER: LEBRON JAMES BY ROBERT SEALE / TSN;
DWYANE WADE BY VICTOR BALDIZON / NBA / GETTY IMAGES

Send your editorial comments or complaints
to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings
at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.

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The scariest name in the game—
J.J. Redick—
awaits the
contenders
in the
Atlanta
Region.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

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- 6 **On Deck** Know what next week has in store. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
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- 9 **College Basketball Awards** TSN picks the best player and coach, plus its All-Americans.
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- + **DAVE KINDRED**
Barry Bonds is absorbing—not delivering—the big hit.

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the road to victory is a **thirsty** one



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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

TO KNOW LIST

7 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

A dash of slash

Vince Young has been catching a lot of flak lately. Come training camp, he might be catching more than flak.

Some teams are considering using the Texas quarterback as a receiver, especially early in his career. It's highly unlikely any team would draft Young expressly to play receiver, as the Jaguars did with Arkansas quarterback Matt Jones a year ago. But it's comforting to some teams that they could get something out of Young right away if he's not a full-time quarterback.

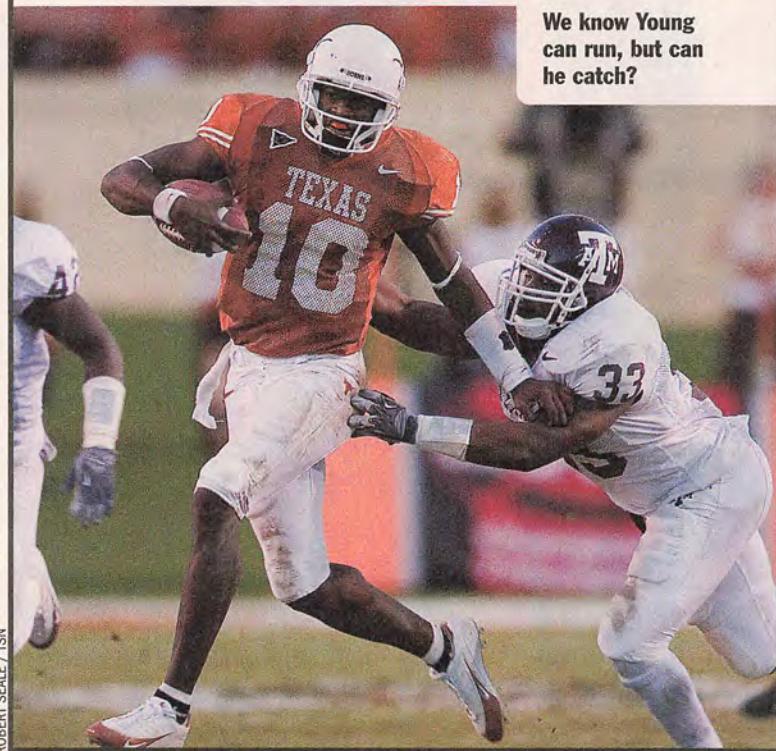
And why not? Young is one of the most athletic players eligible for the draft. Before his Rose Bowl season, many NFL scouts considered him a position switch waiting to happen.

There is some concern Young will face a difficult transition in becoming an NFL quarterback. He left Texas early, so he's not a finished product. He played predominantly from the shotgun and hasn't had exposure to a pro-style offense. Progression reads have not been one of his strong suits. He has an awkward throwing motion that an NFL coach might try to change. So Young has a lot of learning ahead.

Of course, learning is another issue after Young reportedly scored a 6 on his first attempt at the Wonderlic test. He retook the test and reportedly scored a 16. The Wonderlic may or may not tell NFL teams anything of value, but most NFL scouts agree there is a bust factor with Young.

—Dan Pompei

We know Young can run, but can he catch?



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

2

BASKET CASES

NCAA scorers who stand the test of time

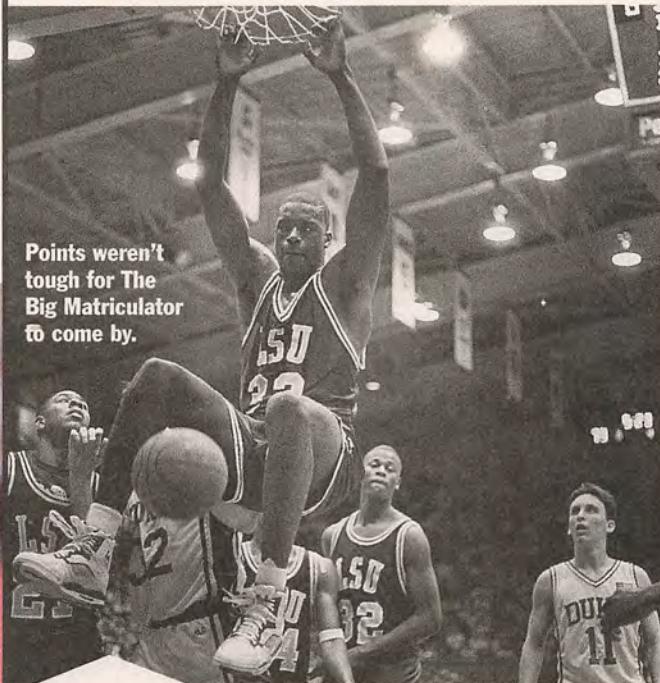
With Adam Morrison and J.J. Redick leading the way, TSN's first-team All-Americans (see page 9) have compiled a combined scoring average of 23.1. That doesn't come close to what Pistol Pete-led consensus All-American teams put up—with Maravich as the fulcrum, they averaged at least 30 points a game from 1968-1970—but this year's bunch has the fifth-best scoring average in the past 35 years.

23.8

1989—Sean Elliott, Arizona; Pervis Ellison, Louisville; Danny Ferry, Duke; Chris Jackson, LSU; Stacey King, Oklahoma

23.7

1988—Sean Elliott, Arizona; Gary Grant, Michigan; Hersey Hawkins, Bradley; Danny Manning, Kansas; J.R. Reid, North Carolina



BILL SETLIFF / TSN ARCHIVES

23.6

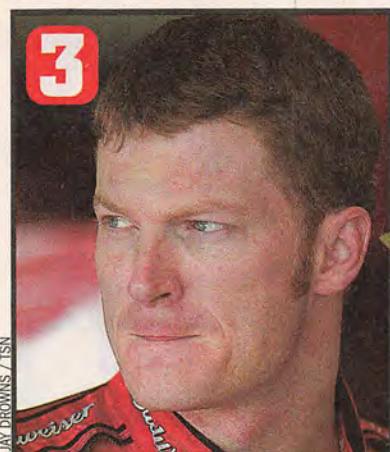
1991—Kenny Anderson, Georgia Tech; Jim Jackson, Ohio State; Larry Johnson, UNLV; Shaquille O'Neal, LSU; Billy Owens, Syracuse

23.5

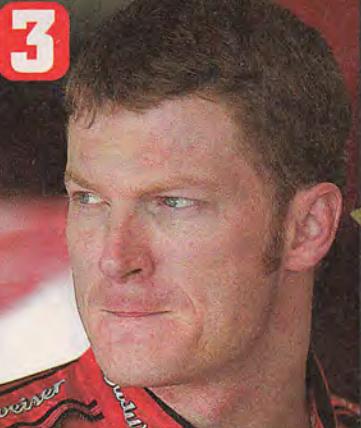
1990—Derrick Coleman, Syracuse; Chris Jackson, LSU; Larry Johnson, UNLV; Gary Payton, Oregon State; Lionel Simmons, La Salle

NEWS YOU CAN'T USE

CBS exec fears U.S. fans too into World Baseball Classic to care about NCAAs >> Steinbrenner eyes 33rd straight win in Yanks' tourney pool >> Duke to



JAY DROWNS / TSN

3

YOU HEARD IT HERE

'You've got to drive these cars with some rage.'

—Dale Earnhardt Jr. (page 43)

4

GO TIME

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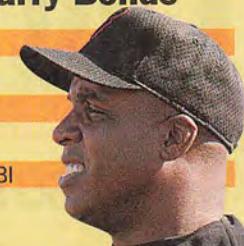
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Vitamins HR and RBI

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Responds to reporters' questions with Silence



ALBERT DICKSON / AP

5

TITLE TALKING

Hook 'em with the Horns

Every Tom, Dick and Harriet has a two-dollar bracket and a treasure chest full of two-bit opinions about the NCAA Tournament, which makes this one tough week to work the break room/barroom effectively. So this is what you say to captivate the crowd (no, not "Pass the beer nuts"): You tell 'em Texas has the chance to go where no NCAA school has gone before—the top of the heap in basketball, football and baseball, simultaneously.

The Longhorns already are the reigning champs in football and baseball. With a No. 2 seed in the Big Dance, this trifecta can really happen, ya dig? —Steve Greenberg

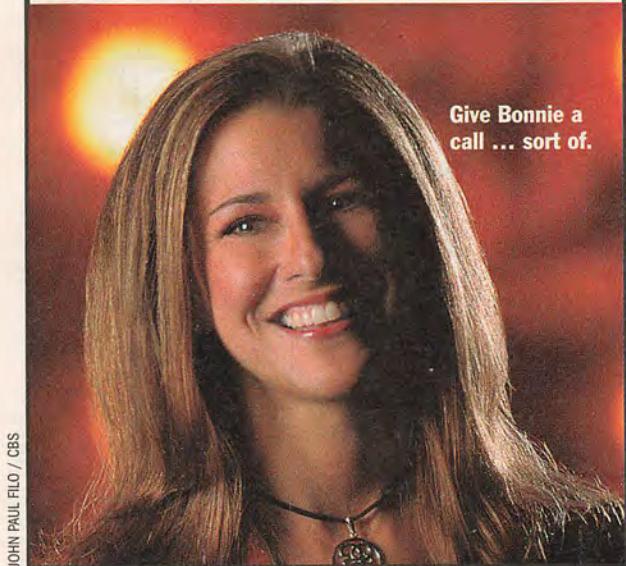
6

TECH SUPPORT

The latest Sprint draw

The madness begins this week—and now it's even taking over your cell phone. Sprint will become the first mobile company to offer original college hoops content to cell phone users. The content primarily will feature video segments with Bonnie Bernstein as the host. Each segment will be packed with game predictions, in-game updates and postgame breakdowns. Customers also can download 1-minute previews of every first-round game. Additional on-demand features, including short videos such as "College Basketball's 10 Greatest Games," will be available later in the tournament. To subscribe ("a la carte" prices apply), Sprint customers can text the word *hoops* to 7777. —Tricia Garner

Give Bonnie a call ... sort of.



JOHN PAUL FILO / CBS

7

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: BIG-DREAMING COACHES

Their latest auditions start now

For a college basketball coach looking to move up in the world, working the NCAA Tournament is like auditioning for a movie role by acting in a Broadway play alongside Al Pacino and Kevin Spacey. The pressure and demands are just as high, but there's more money in Hollywood.

These guys are ready for their close-ups:

Mike Anderson, UAB. His last two teams advanced in the tournament. His high-pressure style might make him appealing to Missouri because Bruce Pearl's similar approach has worked so well at Tennessee.

Greg McDermott, Northern Iowa.

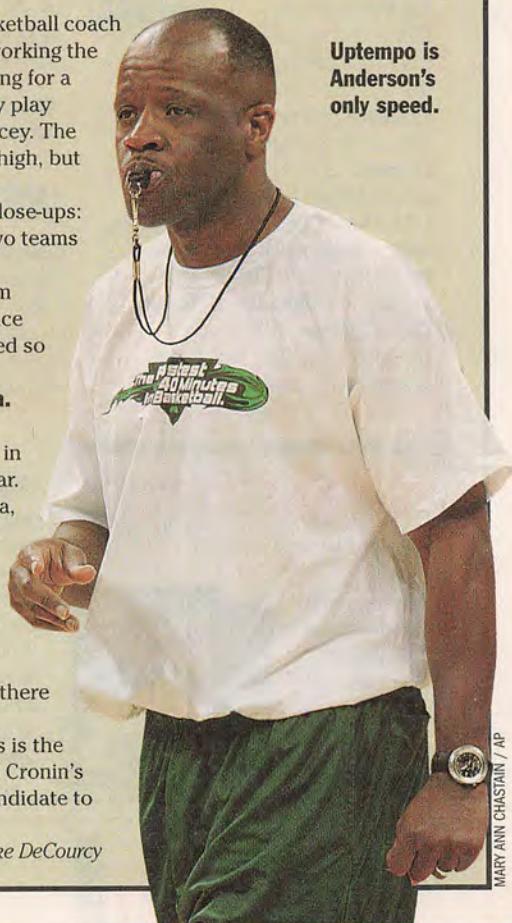
Missouri also has been looking at McDermott, who has the Panthers in the tournament a third straight year. But he might prefer to work at Iowa, should current coach Steve Alford take over for Mike Davis at Indiana.

Mark Fox, Nevada. In the tournament for the second time, Fox is somebody Kansas State might like—he previously worked there as an assistant.

Mick Cronin, Murray State. This is the second tournament appearance in Cronin's three years as coach. He'll be a candidate to replace Rod Barnes at Ole Miss.

—Mike DeCourcy

Uptempo is Anderson's only speed.



MARY ANN CHASTAIN / AP

ON DECK

The week ahead in sports

THIS I GOTTA SEE

SAT 18

Second-round coverage of the NCAA Tournament begins at 1 p.m. on CBS, but start your hoops day at noon with the hourlong HBO documentary *:03 from Gold*, a moving examination of the U.S. Olympians' controversial 1972 loss to the Soviets in Munich. The best part: By comparison, getting screwed on your brackets really won't seem so bad.



SANDRA TENUTO FOR TSN

Knight

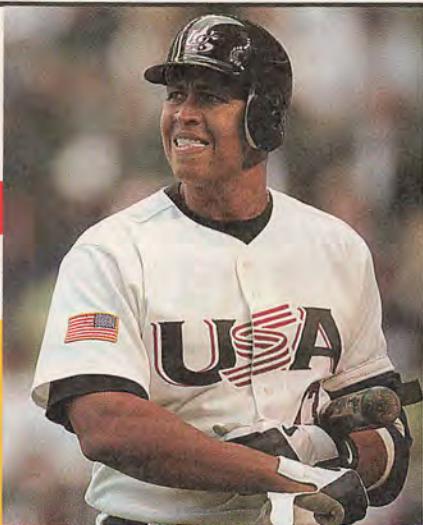
SUN 19

Bob Knight won't be anywhere near the **Big Dance** (noon, CBS), but find your way to him on the dial if you can—in a reputation-making 1980 interview with Dan Rather (*60 Minutes on Classic*, 2:30 p.m., ESPN Classic) and on *Knight School* (10 p.m., ESPN). Two of the final four Texas Tech walk-on hopefuls will get the boot. ■ Also from ESPN Classic, at 10:30 p.m.: **Muhammad Ali vs. Chuck Wepner** in 1975—a 15-round blood bath that was the inspiration for *Rocky*.

MON 20

If Team USA is going to advance to the **World Baseball Classic title game** (9 p.m., ESPN), it'll need better pitching, timelier hitting and an answer for that dang Finnish goalie.

■ **Pros vs. Joes** (10 p.m., Spike). You might not have much use for baseball, hot dogs, apple pie or Chevrolet—but not even you can resist a bunch of shabby contestants digging in to hit against John Rocker.



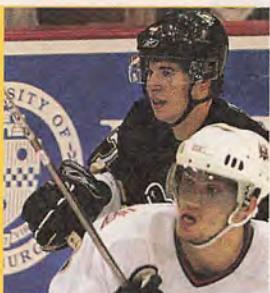
CHARLI RIEDEL / AP

Come on, A-Rod—put that biscuit in the basket already.

TUE 21

Penguins at Senators (7 p.m., OLN). Caps rookie Alex Ovechkin is stealing too much love from Sidney Crosby. The latter is as fun to watch as anyone in the game, and the Sens are, well, awesome. Good times.

Ovechkin (foreground) is terrific, but so is Sid—and Sid's on TV tonight.



GENE J. PUSKAR / AP

WED 22

Heat at Pistons (8 p.m., ESPN). They're still talking about Dwyane Wade's fourth quarter extravaganza the last time these big boppers met—a 2-point Heat win on February 12.

THU 23, FRI 24

Better get from work to the bar/basement in a hurry—**Sweet 16 action** tips shortly after 7 p.m. both nights on CBS. (Human interaction not recommended.)

—Steve Greenberg

COMING AT YOU

In the March 31 issue

Mmm, mmm good—those '05 White Sox sure did sizzle.



2006 Baseball Preview. You might say we're all mixed up—as we see it, there are as many as two dozen big-league clubs with playoff ingredients. So we'll break down the recipe for success into its individual parts and assess which teams have what they'll need to *really* get cooking. Our own ingredients for a five-star preview include our Power Poll, an update on Barry Bonds, fantasy tips and even some practical jokes. Best served with a house wine because we don't go for fancy stuff.

- Some NFL draft prospects have a label to shed—think the dreaded 'tweener—before they can rise as high as they think they should.
- More NCAA Tournament coverage than you can stand ... not that there's anything wrong with that.

BOB HILLE'S
STARTING

5

1 The NCAA Tournament.

Once it starts, efficiency and productivity decline, which leads to a disappointing bottom line. But enough about Gonzaga.

2 The NFL.

Owners approved the new labor deal, 30-2. The Bills and Bengals voted *no*, apparently thinking the question was, "Have you ever won or do you ever expect to win a Super Bowl?"

3 Jeff Gordon.

Madame Tussauds Las Vegas unveiled a life-size wax statue of him. It's so realistic, it melts with 10 laps to go.

4 Spring.

I'm fighting a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. The change of seasons can't get here soon enough. I feel like a Penguins season-ticket holder.

5 Baseball.

Teams will start selling "approved supplements" to players in an effort to prevent positive drug tests—and really embarrassing book excerpts.

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MY TURN

Joe Buck

> FOX Sports' lead play-by-play announcer for the NFL and MLB > Frequent guest on Sporting News Radio

Going to a potluck party

You bring the furry mascots, and I'll bring all the teams that wear red. Together, we'll make one heck of a bracket.

It's that time of year again. No, not when spring training is in full bloom or when the free-agent period starts in the NFL. No, this is when Marge, or someone like her in an office near you, hits the jackpot and wins the NCAA Tournament office pool.

You know Marge—the nice lady who has the perfect work space with pictures of her kids in their Winthrop University sweatshirts and her grandkids in their Disney pajamas. That's not a slight to all office workers named Marge, by the way. It's just that if we all were honest with ourselves and one another, we would admit that our knowledge of the field of 65 teams is as deep as a Paula Abdul song critique.

It's OK, but I beg you—don't try to pass yourself off as a bracketologist. Leave that yelling and screaming to Digger, Dick and Jay. They know what they are talking about. Not you. Certainly not me. I have no idea why I pick the teams I do when I get my sheet. It is virtually



BOB LEVERONE / TSN



JAMIE SABAU FOR TSN

In the hoops food chain, North Carolina's ram just has to beat some birds.

impossible to say who will wind up in your Final Four unless you pick the No. 1 seeds. In other words, it's hard to be creative. Before the tournament starts, there is no way to tell which school will be battling which school in the second round. All it takes is one team to pull a Bode and not show up and your bracket belongs at the bottom of Tubby the Turtle's cage.

All it takes is one team to pull a Bode and your bracket belongs at the bottom of Tubby the Turtle's cage.

Don't agree with me? If you are so sure, then fill out only one sheet. Quit trying to figure out all of the permutations it would take to guarantee a win and at least get your money back. Please don't tell me why you think

UNC Wilmington has a shot at the Sweet 16 or why LSU is overrated—unless you went to one of those schools. It should be law in this land that if you are going to trumpet Iona's chances, you at least have to know what state the school is in, its conference and one player's name. If not, then save it and pick that team only if you like its colors.

I like to choose by mascot. Any team with a furry one usually beats one with feathers and so on. Use the food chain as your guide. What I am saying is, don't pick the Runnin' Mollusks. According to this model, they've got no chance.

There is so much luck involved that following the thing and really caring—unless you went to a school that gets hot—is almost impossible. That is, unless you pick a lady I like to call Cinderella. It is akin to Charlie's finding the Golden Ticket. For weeks you can pass yourself off as a hoops genius. You can laugh as you pass the television and ridicule the talking head who expresses surprise that the team you picked just knocked off UConn. What is a bracket

buster to the rest of the land is suddenly your free pass to scoff at Clark Kellogg.

But just so you know, I don't buy it. I know it was luck. But that's OK. I say embrace your inner Marge and let her shine in all her glory on your personal road to Indianapolis.

Oh, and remember, Marge likes the Eagles. Her kids went to Winthrop.

Sporting News

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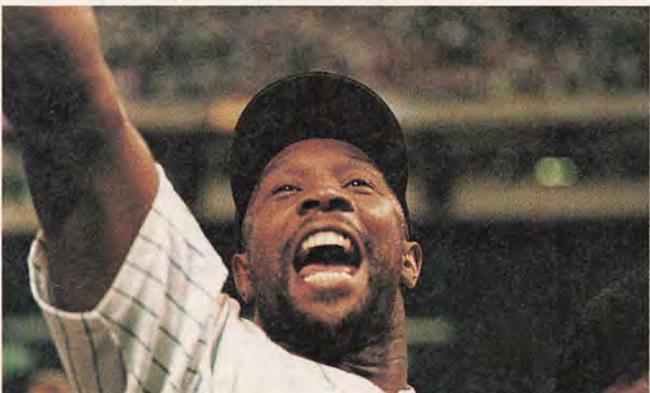
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YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.

Kirby Puckett was a picture of class, heart and determination. His will to be great made him one of the best of my generation. —bmf2511 via SportingNews.com



TSN ARCHIVES

■ Kirby Puckett was my favorite player when I was growing up—not only because of his baseball skills but because of his love and honor for the game and his vigor and passion for life. No matter what problems he may have had off the field, he will always be one of the game's greats and one of my heroes. —The Runs1 via SportingNews.com

■ How could you not include one of the NBA's 50 greatest players on your list of NAIA players (TSN, March 10)? Scottie Pippen attended the University of Central Arkansas. —Jared Thompson, Cabot, Ark.

■ I am 16 and could tell you everything you'd never want to know about hair and makeup. But I read every issue of your magazine and would never dare tell my dad because he'd never let me live it down. Keep up the great work. You're obviously doing something right—I'm reading your magazine, and that is a big accomplishment in itself. —Katy Newcomb, St. Louis

■ Just think, if Barry Bonds had been on steroids sooner, he might have gunned down Sid Bream at home plate in the playoffs instead of throwing that

14-hop joke that took 15 minutes to reach home plate.
—mnemonics1 via SportingNews.com

■ The Cubs will be very happy with Juan Pierre's production (TSN, March 17). He is one of a dying breed of pure leadoff hitters. —rumraiders via SportingNews.com

■ The reason the Colts are one of the top teams every year is they are always looking toward the future and reloading (TSN, March 10). Edgerrin James is still a good back but not for the money he wants. —iowarat via SportingNews.com

■ Count me among the many who feel the exclusion of Buck O'Neil from the Baseball Hall Of Fame is a travesty (TSN, March 17). I am 44, and people of my generation know of the Negro Leagues because of this man.

—Larry McGovern, Villa Hills, Ky.

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: LOVE OF THE GAME

Posted by gantfan5

I could have cared less about the World Baseball Classic, but what I saw shocked me. I saw MLB players laughing, joking and, at the same time, playing ball to win! Isn't that what sports are about? We've all wanted the talent of the pros to be combined with the passion of college. For a brief moment, I saw that. I saw it in the ballclubs as well as the fans, and I loved it.

RE: BACK IN BLACK

Posted by snakeStabler06

Usually, at this time of year, I'd be getting into baseball and be fully into hockey. This year is totally different. It's all about football. Norv Turner finally getting canned is a big reason, but mainly it's because Art Shell is back. To me, this means the Raiders are back. Maybe not immediately, but I don't think 8-8 is out of the question in '06.

RE: PLENTY OF BLAME TO GO AROUND

Posted by willp602

It took an investigation by the federal government to do anything about doping in MLB. The owners want the seats filled, the players want to be paid, and the fans like to see hits. 'Roids were good business for everyone. By not preserving the integrity of the game, MLB was hurting itself as badly as the players who were doping were hurting themselves.

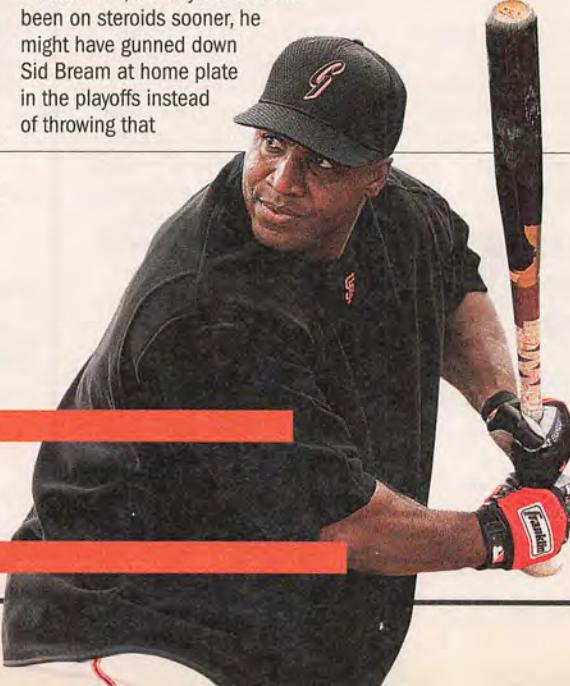
Will Barry Bonds ever get to 756 home runs?

SPORTINGNEWS.COM USERS

YES	NO
26%	74%

SPORTING NEWS STAFF

YES	NO
17%	83%



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

RADIO STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

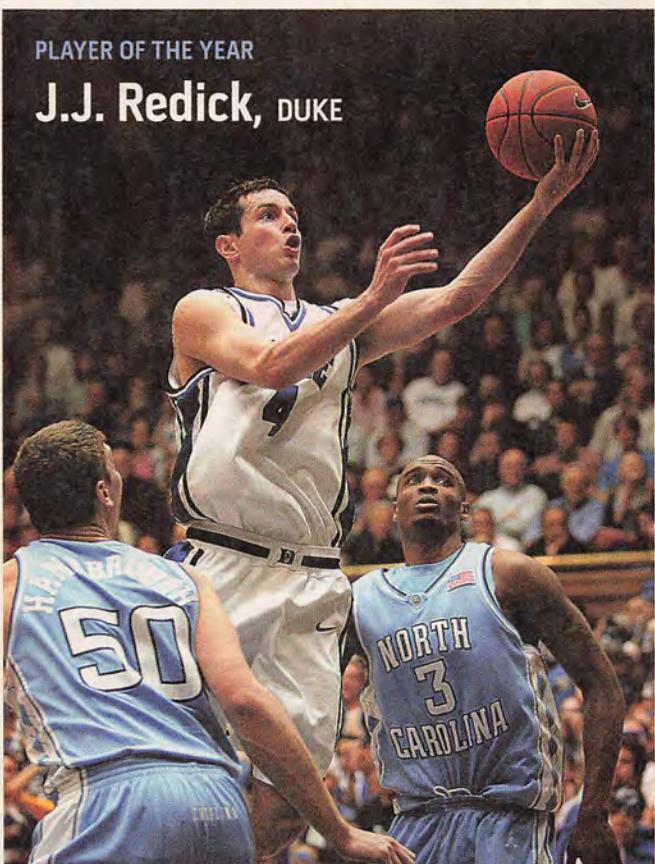
'If Barry Bonds came out and admitted that he used steroids and said he was sorry and just did it to get a competitive edge, I would still not forgive him. This guy is a cheat and will always be one. I hope he retires before breaking Babe Ruth's and Hank Aaron's home run records because baseball does not need tainted records in its history. This guy has wronged the game and needs to leave the diamond.'

—Steve in Houston on the Rick Ballou Show

2006

COLLEGE BASKETBALL AWARDS

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

J.J. Redick, DUKE

GERALD BROOME / AP

TSN All-Americans

FIRST TEAM

J.J. Redick
G, Duke, Sr.**Randy Foye**

G, Villanova, Sr.

Brandon Roy

G, Washington, Sr.

Adam Morrison

F, Gonzaga, Jr.

Tyler Hansbrough

F, North Carolina, Fr.

SECOND TEAM

Allan Ray
G, Villanova, Sr.**Chris Lofton**,
G, Tennessee, So.**Leon Powe**
F, California, So.**Glen Davis**
F, LSU, So.**Shelden Williams**
F, Duke, Sr.

All-freshman team

Dominic James
G, Marquette**Brandon Rush**
G, Kansas**Tyrus Thomas**
F, LSU**Shawne Williams**
F, Memphis**Tyler Hansbrough**
F, North Carolina

CHUCK BURTON / AP

When asked in January about possibly becoming national player of the year, J.J. Redick said, "To be player of the year is not my goal. At all. If it happened, it would be awesome, but my goals are smaller, more of a day-to-day thing."

Redick has been awesome in his senior season—one in which he contended with Gonzaga's Adam Morrison for the national scoring lead and, indeed, for this award.

Redick distinguished himself by elevating his play in the Atlantic Coast Conference, where he averaged 29.4 points per game, and by competing for a team that ranked at the top of the polls for much of the season.

Redick has increased his shooting accuracy from 40.8 percent as a junior to 47.7 percent. He also became the ACC's career scoring leader, breaking the record Dickie Hemric of Wake Forest held for more than a half-century. That wasn't a stated goal, either, but Redick embraced it with a smile. —Mike DeCourcy

COACH OF THE YEAR

Bruce Pearl,
TENNESSEE

Tennessee's only major recruit for the 2005-06 season is no threat from 3-point range and never will put up a double double. But Bruce Pearl did completely reinvent Volunteers basketball (men's basketball, that is).

Pearl was hired too late to bring in difference-making players. So he pushed the guys who had finished 14-17 a year earlier and implored them to get in shape and play with passion. Despite limited depth, the Vols became a pressing team. Pearl drove Tennessee to the top of the Southeastern Conference East division, and the Vols are headed to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2001.

Nearly as important, Pearl reconnected the program to a fan base searching for a reason to embrace the team. Tennessee fans consistently filled the immense Thompson-Boling Arena, and their enthusiasm helped fuel the pressure defense applied by the Vols.



MARK HUMPHREY / AP

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR

Tyler Hansbrough, NORTH CAROLINA

There have been many great freshmen who have excelled because of their athleticism and skill, but Tyler Hansbrough's strength and energy separate him from other members of his class—and most college players in general.

Listed at 235 pounds—but clearly he has packed on more muscle—the 6-9 Hansbrough can overpower opponents and is special in his ability to finish plays near the basket. The foundation he provided facilitated the Tar Heels' recovery from massive player losses to a second-place finish in the ACC.

Hansbrough scored in double figures in 26 of 27 regular-season games, and his improvement largely was responsible for Carolina's going 10-1 to finish the regular season—a run punctuated by a triumph at Duke.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

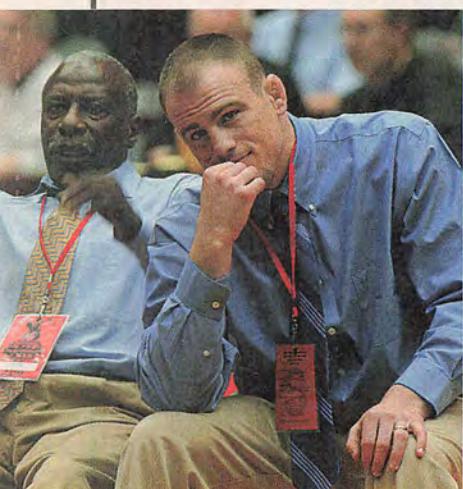
Wrangler

presents



Things
all sports fans
must do before they die

It's major-college wrestling—and it's well worth your while. Tune in to this weekend's national finals, stick an ice pack on your cauliflower ear, and make some travel plans for next season. *By Ryan Fagan*



The great Sanderson (right) wrestled for Bobby Douglas at ISU; now he coaches alongside him.

For Missouri's Josh Wagner, it was a backbreaking effort—and a loss. Nebraska's Robert Sanders won this 149-pound match and finished third, which gave him a berth in the national tournament.



No matter whom you root for, you're impressed by everyone.

PHOTOS BY CHARLIE LITCHFIELD FOR TSN

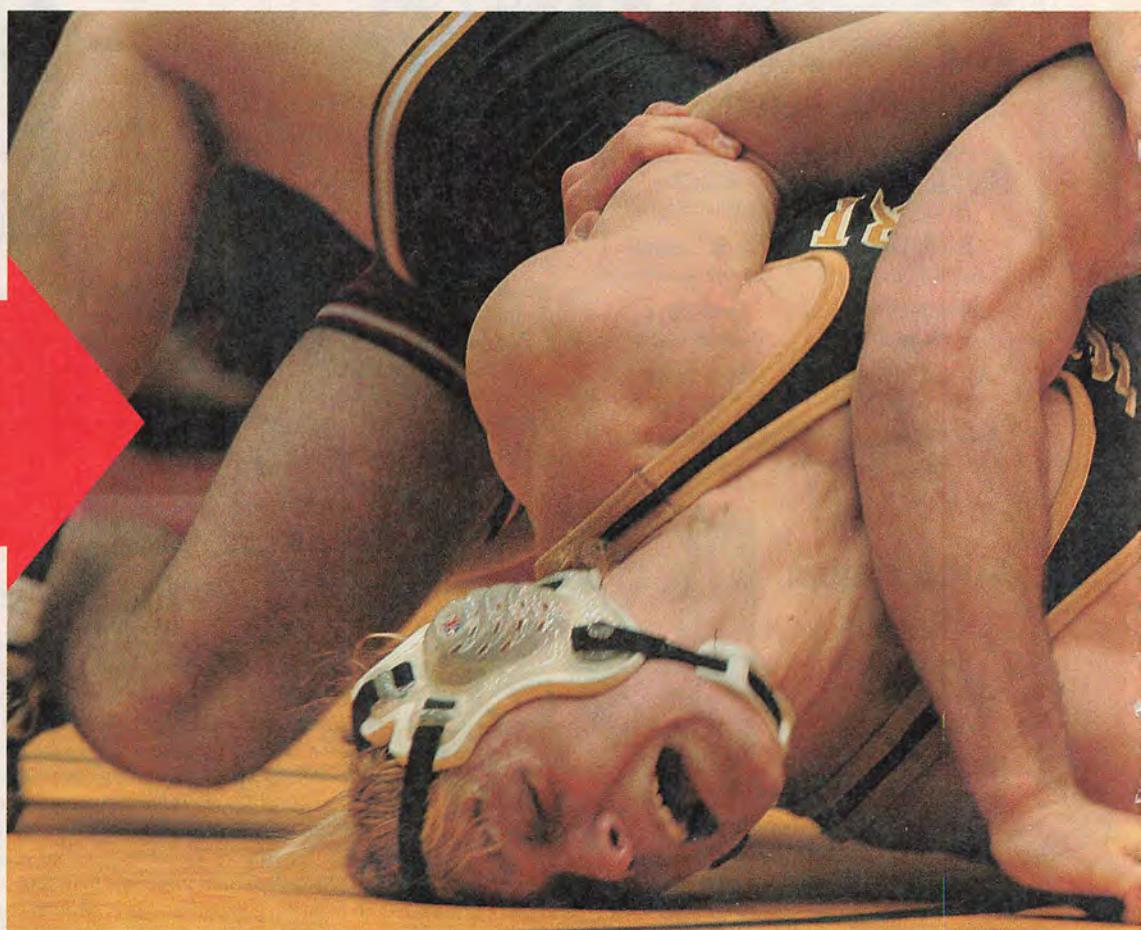
Take it to the mat

Welcome to Iowa. It's the home of corn, hogs and—most important to a competition junkie such as myself—wrestling. I'm a wrestling appreciator, which is to say I respect the hell out of the sport, although I wouldn't insult its die-hard fans by counting myself among them. But I know where I am. Legends Dan Gable and Cael Sanderson competed here in Ames, home of Iowa State. Gable, who went on to win 15 national titles as coach at Iowa, was 118-1 as an ISU wrestler; Sanderson, now

an assistant at Iowa State, was 159-0. Both won Olympic gold.

I've traveled here for the Big 12 championships. I've ebbed and flowed with the fans through the first three rounds. I've hollered in excitement, tolerated the lulls in the action. I've sampled the Clone Cone—vanilla ice cream dyed red and yellow—and discussed the merits of the Walking Taco, a concoction of meat, cheese and chips stuffed into a Doritos bag.

I've seen the rising of hopes and the crushing of



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Wrestlers have their One Shining Moment, too

If wrestling fans do one thing well, it's travel to the big events. Missouri was host for the three-day championships in 2005 and drew 95,459 fans to the Savvis Center in St. Louis. Another Big 12 school, Oklahoma, gets decoration detail this year.

What: NCAA Division I wrestling championships

When: March 16-18

Where: Ford Center, Oklahoma City

TV: Semifinals are at 7 p.m. ET Friday on ESPNU; finals are at 7:30 p.m. Saturday on ESPN.

Tickets: Sold in three-day, six-session packages. Only upper-deck packages remain. They're \$100 each and are available through Ticketmaster.



dreams. Hey, kid, you won your first-round match at 11:20 a.m.? Enjoy it—you're going against the No. 1 wrestler in the country in an hour. This is wrestling. Suck it up or go home.

It's easy to identify with these athletes out there on their islands. They're not 6-7, 335-pound behemoths shrouded by facemasks and shoulder pads; they are like us. Some of the elite wrestlers in the country are 5-foot-nothing and weigh less than a Rottweiler. We could be them if we, too, had busted our butts as kids instead of goofing off.

Their battle scars are in the open. Chronically black eyes, busted noses and the single most identifiable feature of a wrestler—the cauliflower ear. That's what happens when you get your head slammed into the mat for years. Which begs a question: What's the reward? There are no *SportsCenter* interviews, not much media attention at all.

So why do they do it? My wrestling days ended when I realized my younger brother was getting too strong, so I pulled an Elway and retired as king of 721 Treadway Avenue. I haven't been in their shoes. But I see their drive,

and I feel their passion.

In the finals, I see Iowa State's Nate Gallick and Oklahoma's Teyon Ware, the top two 141-pounders in the country, probing, testing and trying to exploit any opportunities. Gallick won the Big 12s last year, but Ware won the national title. On this day, Gallick finally hits a 2-point takedown in the second overtime round and holds on for a 5-3 win. Both wrestlers are utterly exhausted.

I see Missouri's 174-pounder, Ben Askren, toying with his opponent. Askren, who is 38-0 and finished second in the country last year, records eight takedowns instead of going for a quick pin. Why? It looks as though he's trying techniques that might help him in this year's national finals—and perhaps beyond.

Their drive has to be about becoming the best on a very basic individual level. That has to be where the run-till-you-puke, starve-yourself, gotta-cut-weight motivation comes from. There is no other sport in which your strengths and weaknesses are as transparent. Either you're better than the other guy or you're not. It's pretty simple.

True fan? Getting there. Appreciator? Yep. Hooked? Definitely.

Head for the heartland for wrestling at its best

Wrestlers in the Midwest dominate the upper half of the polls, but what other sport has Edinboro (Pa.) University in its top 20? The Fighting Scots are the class of the Eastern Wrestling League, but that's not the best wrestling conference you didn't know existed. The top three conferences this season:

1 Big Ten.

Minnesota and Michigan are in the top three of every poll. Iowa, with its 20 national titles, is lurking near the top 10 along with Penn State and Illinois.

2 Big 12.

Only five of its schools field wrestling programs, but those five are all ranked in the top 10. Oklahoma State has won three consecutive national titles—and a record 33 overall—and is a decent bet to make it four in a row. Iowa State, Oklahoma, Missouri and Nebraska could each provide individual champs.

3 EIWA.

That's right, the Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association is in the house with four teams in the top 25. Never heard of the EIWA? It has been around since 1905, and we promise you've heard of its members—Army, Navy, Lehigh and Ivy Leaguers Cornell, Penn, Harvard, Brown and Columbia, to name a few. They'll kick your butt, then beat you at chess.

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SCOUTING THE TOURNAMENT

GOING ONCE



NCAA DIVISION 1 MEN'S BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP TROPHY

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Shipping costs:	Free, hand-delivered by committee chair Craig Littlepage
Item location:	Indianapolis, IN, United States
Bid history:	65 bids

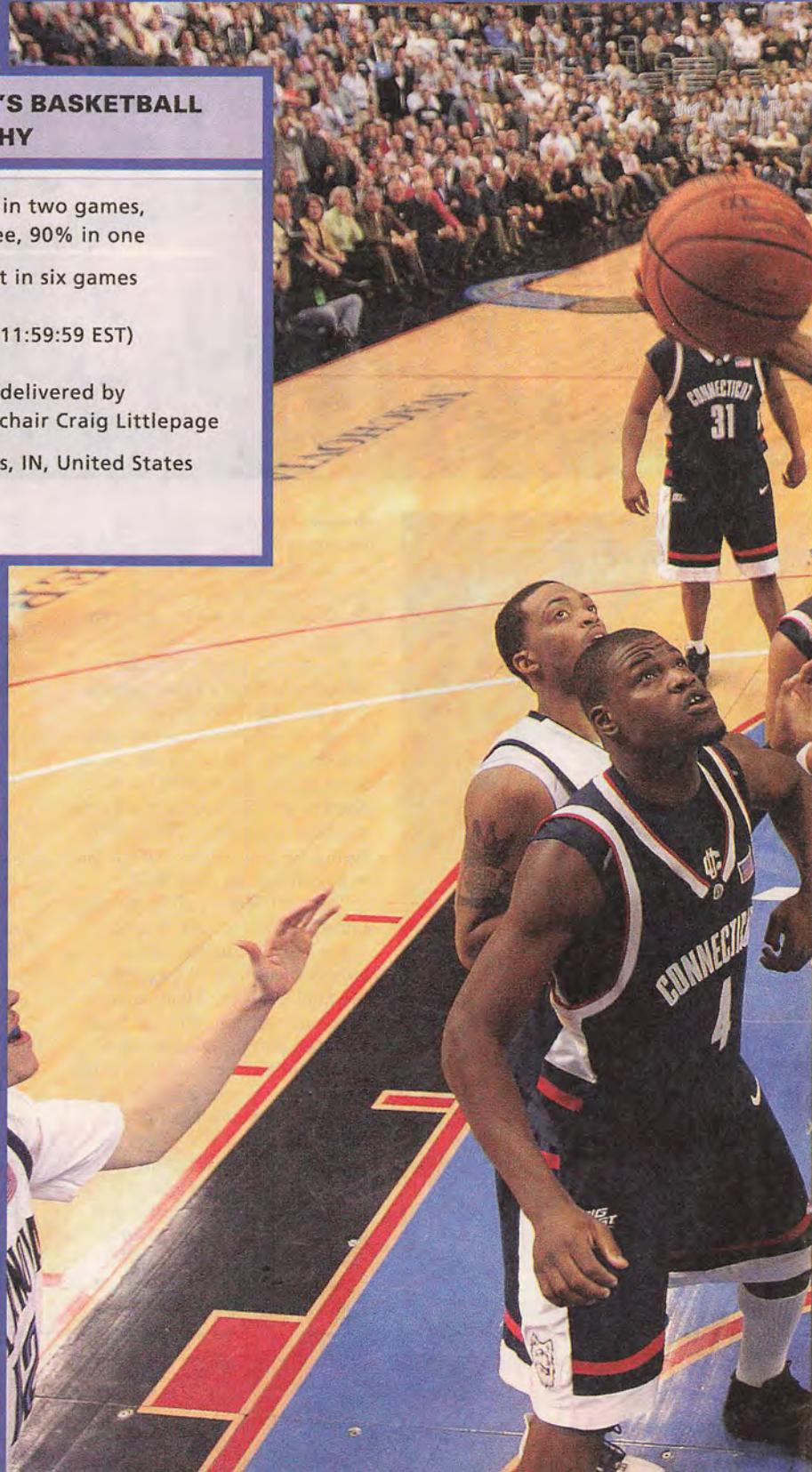
UConn is the only team with all the resources needed to put in the winning bid on a priceless piece of NCAA hardware—but that doesn't mean the Huskies are a lock to take it home

As the Connecticut Huskies study the bracket for the 2006 NCAA Tournament, they can view the pursuit of the championship as though they are pondering an expensive item in an online auction, with the wealth of Oprah Winfrey—or a bunch of meatpackers from Nebraska—to spend as they wish.

It could not be simpler for UConn. No one has what this team has. Every other contender is trying to disguise significant flaws that would doom it in other championship years but, in this particular season, simply put it into the group of teams eager to take advantage if UConn chooses to be parsimonious with its extraordinary physical capital.

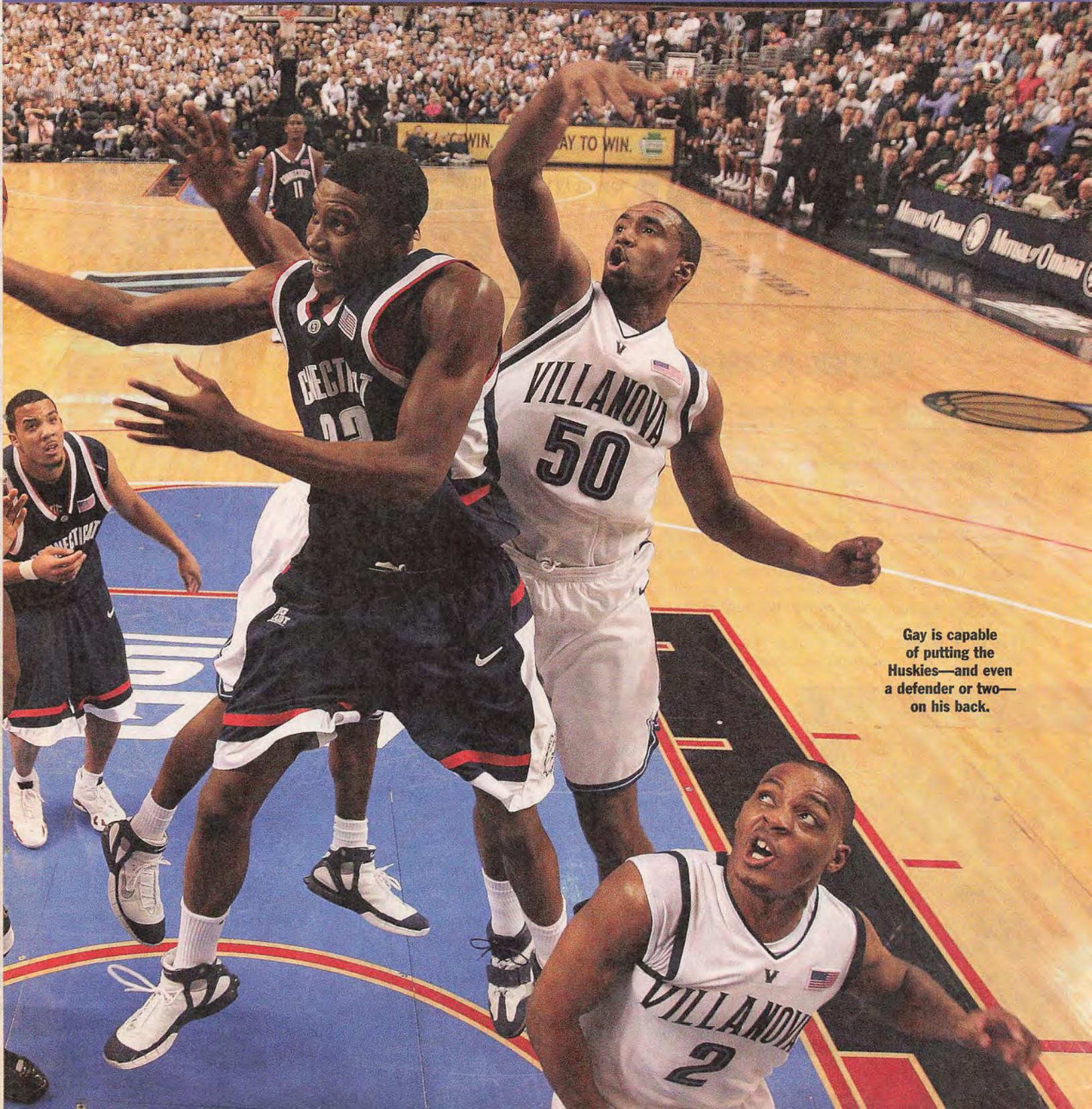
The Huskies have a transcendent talent who, theoretically, can carry them when necessary (Rudy Gay). They have size and length (Josh Boone, Hilton Armstrong). They have an exceptional playmaking point guard (Marcus Williams). They have big-time 3-point shooters (Rashad Anderson, Denham Brown). They have experience (four Huskies played in the 2004 NCAA title game). They have juice on the bench (Jeff Adrien, Anderson). They have the

NED DISHMAN / GETTY IMAGES; TROPHY BY TSN



GOING TWICE

By Mike DeCourcy



Gay is capable
of putting the
Huskies—and even
a defender or two—
on his back.

NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

ability to get big defensive stops (NCAA leaders in blocks). They have a legendary coach (Jim Calhoun).

What they seem to lack is gumption, guts, will. Call it what you like, but try to keep it clean. Even the players admit their effort frequently is insufficient. Any hope they might be energized by playing in March dissipated when they nearly were beaten by a mediocre Louisville team at home on senior day and then lost to Syracuse in a Big East Tournament quarterfinal game.

Lots of teams have recovered from conference tournament disappointments and won the NCAA title. Of the last 10 national champions that played in league tourneys, half won and half did not. UConn's loss to Syracuse, though, seemed more a continuation of a disconcerting trend than simply the result of an

off day. Either way, another performance like it will lead to a less capable team winning the bidding for a priceless hunk of wood.

If UConn doesn't want it, there are a number of teams behind the Huskies with the desire—and most of the equipment—to become the champs.

Duke. Moving DeMarcus Nelson into the lineup helps address the Devils' athletic deficiencies on the wing, but can he also be an offensive weapon to complement J.J. Redick?

Memphis. The Tigers are young and have gone too long without consistent competition; the natural byproduct of that combination is the development of bad habits. But no one has more players who can manufacture a bucket.

Texas. If the Longhorns lose, it'll probably be by a lot. So what?

PLAYING POSSUM

Occasionally, NCAA Tournament heroes don't come from the All-American and all-conference lists. Some players are better than the seasons they produced and are good enough to carry their teams for a while in the tourney.

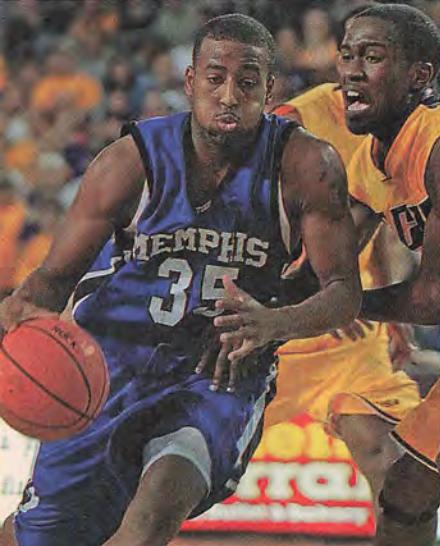
Jeff Green, PF, Georgetown. Green is powerful, athletic and skilled; he can shoot 3s, score in the post, rebound in traffic and occasionally block shots. How is it that he has averaged only 11.9 points? Well, he has attempted 10 or more shots in only 16 of the Hoyas' 30 games.

Darius Washington, PG, Memphis. He continues to wrestle with the transition to point guard but has the ability to take over a game as few other collegians at his position. There will be fewer strong point guards in this tournament than in the past, so somebody who can create offense as proficiently as Washington will be valuable. He's worth much more than his 13.5 points and 3.3 assists per game suggest.

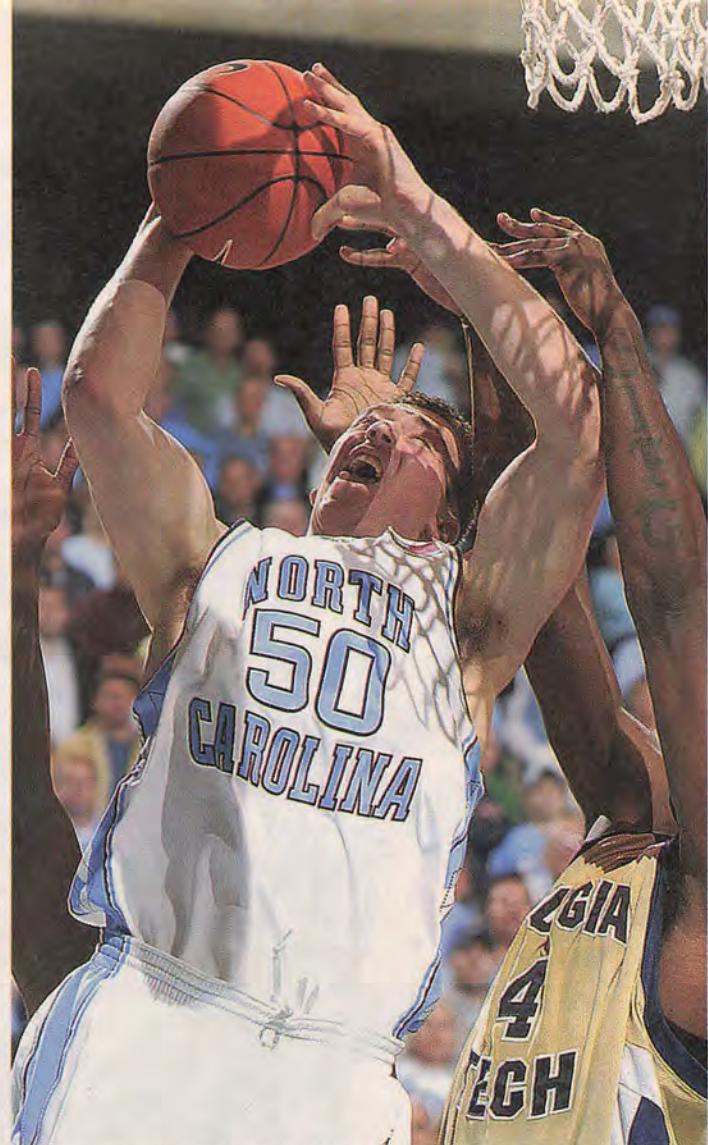
LaMarcus Aldridge, C, Texas. Although 15.0 points and 9.0 rebounds per game seem like fairly ample production, Aldridge is capable of more. He has

had moments of dominance but also has been content to play a secondary role occasionally. He is long, quick off his feet and uncommonly skilled—Aldridge has a decent game on the right block and a couple of sizzling moves from the left side. If he grabs this tournament, it'll be tough to take it away from him.

Joe Crawford, SG, Kentucky. The Wildcats' gasping offense cries out for someone who can create his own shot. Crawford is ready to answer the call. The Wildcats are so directionless, though, they often don't notice him. He had seven double-figure scoring games in an eight-game late-season stretch but took 10 or more shots in only four of those games.



KARL DEBLAKER / AP



JEFFREY A. CAMARATI / AP

Hansbrough enjoys the rough stuff under the basket more than most freshmen—of course, he's 20 and built like Hulk Hogan.

Carolina—still finer?

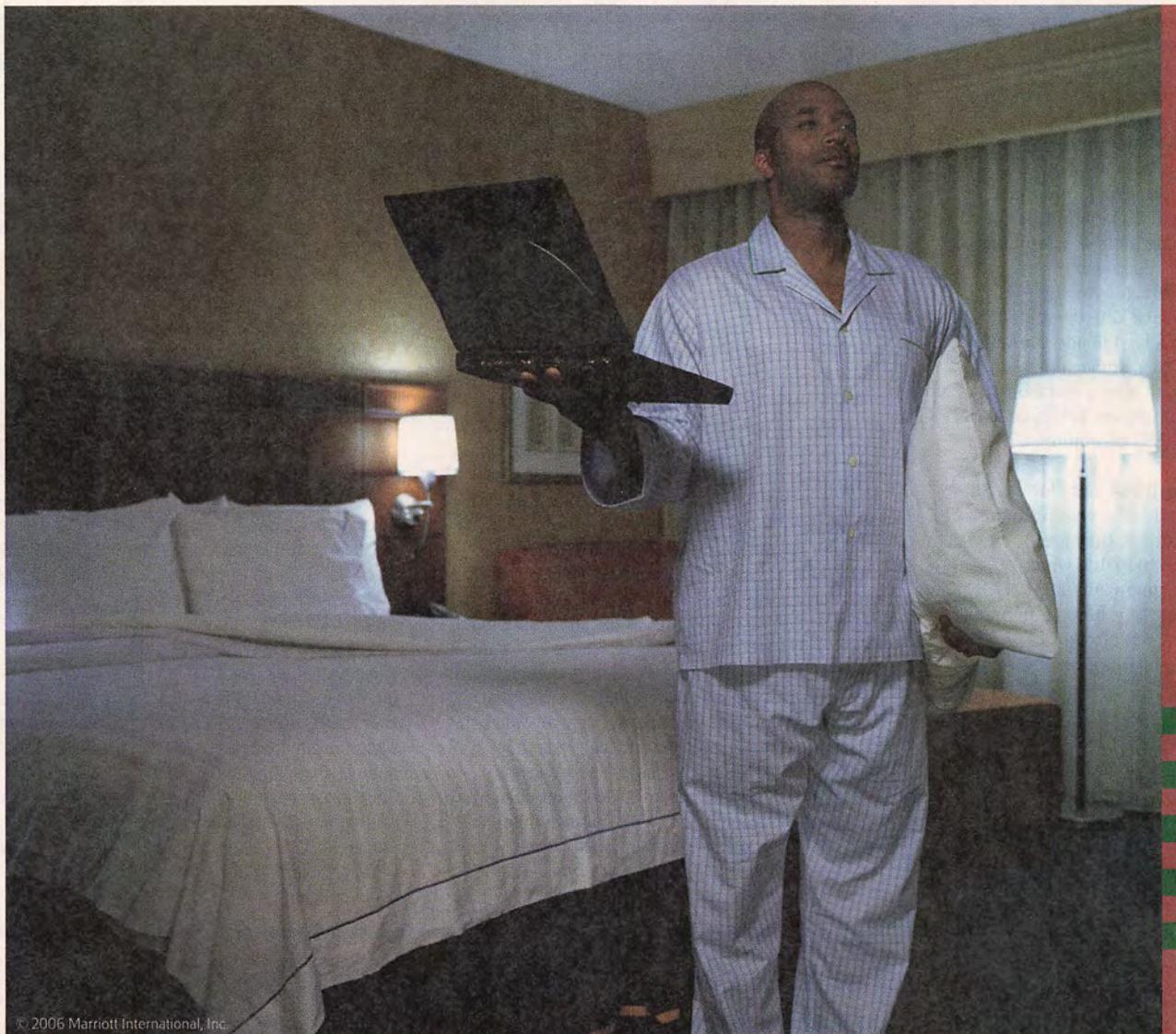
There are at least four reasons it's not totally nuts to suggest North Carolina could defend its NCAA championship.

1. Tyler Hansbrough. College basketball's best big man usually isn't a freshman, but Hansbrough is an unusual freshman. He's a little older, having turned 20 in November. And he's much more powerful. Most young big men still are learning to handle physicality, but Hansbrough's strength is his greatest asset.

2. Offense. Nothing is more important to winning an NCAA championship than the ability to generate baskets. The Tar Heels rank in the nation's top 20 in scoring offense and field-goal percentage. The only other championship contenders that can match that are Florida and Duke. The Heels also rank among the leaders in offensive efficiency, according to stats guru Ken Pomeroy of Kenpom.com.

3. They're not really defending. Other than coach Roy Williams and his assistants, none of last season's principals is playing a similar role this year. Reserves in 2005, Reysawn Terry and David Noel have become leading men. Backup point guard Quentin Thomas has progressed from frazzled freshman to stable sophomore. The rest of these guys were in high school. There is no more pressure on this team to win it all this season than there is on any other high-but-not-that-high seed.

4. There is no great team. The point has been made but bears repeating.



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NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

They're powerful, tough and have multiple scoring options. If Daniel Gibson shoots with confidence, the Longhorns could match their football buddies.

Villanova. In a suspect field, what makes the Wildcats good (peerless attacking from the guard positions) might be enough to overcome their shortcomings (lack of inside power).

Ohio State. Maybe the Buckeyes lack elite talent, but they have a legit inside scorer in Terence Dials, some serious perimeter shooters and a big-time coach. They're not totally unlike Indiana's 1987 championship team.

Kansas, UCLA and Florida. All talented, all still a year from their best basketball, they are candidates to match what Arizona accomplished in 1997.

Gonzaga. Hey, it could happen.

TSN



WILLIS GLASSON / AP

Bradshaw has a history of playing bigger against the big boys he's likely to face in the tournament.

in eight seasons, and they're getting closer to advancing. Junior Craig Bradshaw, a 6-10 power forward, actually seems to play better against the bigger bodies all the major-conference teams have (19 points vs. Marquette, 15 vs. Memphis) than the smaller guys in the Big South.

Gerry McNamara, Syracuse. He averaged 16.5 points and 6.0 assists as a senior, and somehow he made his way to the top of an assistant coaches survey as the Big East's most overrated player. Hard to believe the league has so many good teams with dumb stuff like that floating around. Understand this: Few have put more passion into being a successful college basketball player. He's not the same guy who hit six 3-pointers in the first half of the 2003 NCAA championship game. He's a lot better.

Steve Burtt, Gary Springer and Anthony Bruin, Iona. OK, these guys have never actually played in the NCAAs before. But if the names are familiar to you, it's because their dads did—and kept their legacies alive by presenting their sons with the same names. The elder Burtt and Springer were stars with an Iona team that reached the NCAAs in 1984; Bruin's dad, the definitive undersized small forward, played for Syracuse in the 1983 tournament.

Hidden weapons

You have to look a little deeper to see what helps some teams excel.

Joakim Noah's handle. Although he is 6-11, Noah can navigate through tight quarters, even against smaller players, because of his ability to dribble the ball. Averaging 13.8 points on 64.5 percent shooting for Florida, he can get the ball to the rim, pull up for jumpers or draw help and pass outside to open shooters. His height also allows him to keep track of teammates more easily than most power forwards.

Mike Jensen's 3-point shooting. While Washington's opponents try to keep Brandon Roy out of the lane and Ryan Appleby from burying them with 3-pointers, Jensen has emerged as a legitimate outside threat. He has hit 40.7 percent of his attempts, including 6-of-8 against Stanford and 4-of-5 at Arizona State.

Arron Afflalo's step-back jumper. UCLA's leading scorer, Afflalo has such an economical release that he needs only a fraction of a second and a fraction of an inch to get off his jump shot. He can create that room with a simple jab step that feigns a drive, then a quick step back to rise for a shot. He's strong enough that he easily can execute this move to launch a 3-pointer.

Je'Kel Foster's commitment. For a guy who earns his minutes with long-range shooting, Foster has gained the Ohio State coaches' praise for never relaxing his effort—even when his shot goes cold. Many scorers let the rest of their game slip when they can't get a shot to drop, but on a night when he was 0-for-6 from the field, Foster held Michigan's Daniel Horton to 4-of-16 shooting.



Noah

Hidden weaknesses

Look deeper still for what might eliminate some top teams.

West Virginia's zone vs. dribble penetration.

While reviewing tape of its loss at West Virginia, Cincinnati discovered that most of its turnovers against coach John Beilein's 1-3-1 scheme occurred when passing the ball from the inside out. In the teams' rematch, Bearcats point guard Devan Downey attacked by dribbling past the initial defender and advancing as far as possible, then dumping the ball toward the baseline. WVU was forced out of the zone, and opponents that can make that happen will face a West Virginia team that plays ordinary man-to-man defense.

Derek Raivio's shooting. A 45.8 percent 3-point shooter as a sophomore, Raivio plummeted to 35.5 percent this season. Gonzaga is riding an 18-game winning streak but has played six games that were decided by four or fewer points in that span. Raivio was 4-for-30 from 3-point range in those six games. In the more comfortable of the 18 wins, he was 28-for-58. Notice a trend?

Villanova's no-dumping policy. When the Villanova guards reach the lane on a drive, they take the ball to the rim or kick it back to 3-point shooters. They rarely choose the third option, which is to react when the interior defense leaves big man Will Sheridan open by dumping the ball off for an easy layup. Sheridan may not be the type of player the Wildcats want to have the ball on the block, but he can make an open layup or dunk. It will be tough for Villanova to win the championship with Sheridan getting only 4.6 shots per game.

So nice to see you again

John Goldsberry, UNC Wilmington.

Goldsberry might have been better off avoiding the NCAAs. It's going to be hard to top his first experience. During his 2002-03 freshman season, Goldsberry had only one double-figure scoring game before the tournament but lit up Maryland with 8-of-8 3-point shooting. He has a 26.0 NCAA Tournament scoring average—because that was his only tournament game. The Seahawks lost to Maryland on a buzzer-beater, so there is one way this tourney could turn out better for Goldsberry.

Winthrop.

The Eagles are back for the sixth time in eight seasons, and they're getting closer to advancing. Junior Craig Bradshaw, a 6-10 power forward, actually seems to play better against the bigger bodies all the major-conference teams have (19 points vs. Marquette, 15 vs. Memphis) than the smaller guys in the Big South.

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Still more Wildcats

It seemed a bit strange a couple months back when Davidson coach Bob McKillop suggested that this year's Wildcats would be better than last year's team. Better than flawless? Better than a team that went 16-0 in the Southern Conference?

That declaration seemed even more curious after Davidson went 10-5 in conference play this season, but McKillop's prediction started to make sense when the Wildcats flattened the SoCon tournament field.

McKillop believes his veteran team fell victim to pressure to reach its own standard for perfection. Davidson defeated Massachusetts, Saint Joseph's and Missouri in nonconference games and seemed to be building a case for a possible at-large bid, but a league tournament title ultimately became necessary.

"We won conference games by significant margins but hadn't been in close games and didn't know how to handle it," McKillop says. That was corrected down the stretch. Davidson executed well enough to pick up a 2-point win against College of Charleston in the final regular-season game and won by 2 again in the tournament quarterfinals.

This is a dangerous team that runs the motion offense beautifully and knows how to handle opponents that are superior athletically. If guards Brendan Winters and Matt McKillop are taking high-quality shots—and making them—Davidson could win its first tournament game since 1969.



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Duke and Connecticut rarely cross paths, but when they get drawn together, count on a full-scale clash with full-blown consequences

By Mike DeCourcy

March magnets

Everyone in the building was more than 600 miles from North Carolina's Research Triangle and 34 days from the Final Four. Connecticut and Villanova were about to play a game the Huskies had to win to stay in the hunt for the Big East championship. So why was one gentleman at UConn's Gampel Pavilion wearing a shirt that made a profane reference to Duke?

This is a most curious "rivalry," Connecticut vs. Duke. It's like a feud between 50 Cent and Yo-Yo Ma. Connecticut rules the Big East. Duke lords over the ACC. They hardly ever meet—and never by choice.

Since the Huskies and Blue Devils shared a Final Four floor in 1999 in St. Petersburg, Fla., they have stood as the dominant programs in college basketball. Duke has won one NCAA championship since (2001) and has reached another Final Four (2004); UConn has earned two titles (1999, 2004) and left tire tracks all over Duke on the way to both.

Still, the Huskies are in the position of wanting what the

Devils have. "I think that for the UConn fans, they feel like they've got Duke coming out of their ears," says Joe D'Ambrosio, who is the Huskies' play-by-play voice and a talk show host for Hartford's WTIC-AM. "I think they want UConn to beat Duke—and be loved like Duke."

For the 18 weeks of the 2005-06 regular season, only Duke and UConn held the No. 1 ranking in the polls. The earliest they can meet in the NCAA Tournament is the title game, which is how it is with these two—they don't play each

other unless it's huge.

Four of their six games since 1990 have been in the NCAA

Tournament. Three times, the winner wound up taking home the championship trophy. Eight current players competed in the 2004 semifinal matchup in San Antonio, which the Huskies won, 79-78.

"I don't think, certainly, the guys at Duke have forgotten about us," Huskies senior forward Denham Brown says. "And we



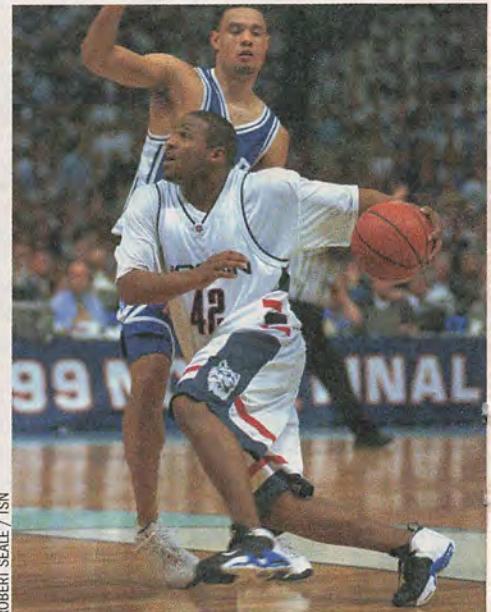
Tale of the tape: Devils vs.



SUSAN RAGAN / AP

All-time favorite Duke moment

Christian Laettner's buzzer-beating jumper in overtime of 1990 East Region final.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

All-time favorite UConn moment

Khalid El-Amin's gutty, decisive drive with 1:05 left in the '99 NCAA title game.



BILL WILSON / TSN

haven't forgotten the hype that Duke gets. If we bump heads in the tournament, it's going to be a full-scale battle."

The 2003-04 Huskies provided coach Jim Calhoun with his second championship. If this team claims another, he will match the number won by Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, whom Calhoun calls "the coach of our generation." That's no small incentive—and Calhoun has

goaded and cajoled and pleaded with this team to reach its immense potential.

"My goal was to get us to be more than a team, but a program," Calhoun says. "I think we're edging toward that. Obviously, we can do a lot to cement that this year."

Duke's approach is different. Whereas UConn has become the dominant program in the Big East—working to fend off periodic challenges from Syracuse, Pittsburgh and, this year, Villanova—the Blue Devils do not need to look far to find a competitor to measure themselves against: reigning NCAA champ North Carolina.

"Most of the Duke fans' venom is directed at Carolina," says Adam Gold, the afternoon talk host at Raleigh's WRBZ-AM. "UConn is there, and they know about it. It's not quite the pink elephant in the room. It's sort of the pink bunny. They know it's

there, but it doesn't slap them in the face every year, so why bother with it unless they have to?"

The Blue Devils are aware of the Huskies' extraordinary talent. "They could field an NBA team," Duke senior forward Lee Melchionni says. But Duke so often has been where it is now—this is its eighth No. 1 seed in the past nine years—that the identity of the competition becomes less an issue than simply continuing to advance.

"We don't compare ourselves to anybody else," Melchionni says. "We have standards within the Duke program, and that's what we try to live up to."

It seems somebody else does, too.

TSN

Huskies

McDonald's All Americans

Duke: 6
UConn: 1

Starters' average height

Duke: 6-5
UConn: 6-7

Top gun

Duke: J.J. Redick, 27.4 ppg
UConn: Rudy Gay, 15.3 ppg

2005-06 last-second heroics

Duke: Sean Dockery's halfcourt heave against Virginia Tech.

UConn: Denham Brown beats the buzzer—and Gonzaga.

Top glass cleaner

Duke: Shelden Williams, 10.3 rpg
UConn: Josh Boone, 7.3 rpg

Team rejections

Duke: 179
UConn: 280

Final Fours

10 2

National titles

3 2

All-time victories

751 730



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NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

ATLANTA

Greensboro, N.C. March 16 and 18

- 1 Duke (30-3)
- 16 Southern (20-12)
- 8 George Washington (26-2)
- 9 UNC Wilmington (25-7)

Jacksonville March 16 and 18

- 5 Syracuse (23-11)
- 12 Texas A&M (21-8)
- 4 LSU (23-8)
- 13 Iona (23-7)

Auburn Hills, Mich. March 17 and 19

- 6 West Virginia (20-10)
- 11 Southern Illinois (22-10)
- 3 Iowa (25-8)
- 14 Northwestern State (25-7)

Dallas March 17 and 19

- 7 California (20-10)
- 10 N.C. State (21-9)
- 2 Texas (27-6)
- 15 Penn (20-8)

Atlanta
March 23 and 25

OAKLAND

Dallas March 17 and 19

- 1 Memphis (30-3)
- 16 Oral Roberts (21-11)
- 8 Arkansas (22-9)
- 9 Bucknell (26-4)

Auburn Hills, Mich. March 17 and 19

- 5 Pitt (24-7)
- 12 Kent State (25-8)
- 4 Kansas (25-7)
- 13 Bradley (20-10)

Salt Lake City March 16 and 18

- 6 Indiana (18-11)
- 11 San Diego State (24-8)
- 3 Gonzaga (27-3)
- 14 Xavier (21-10)

San Diego March 16 and 18

- 7 Marquette (20-10)
- 10 Alabama (17-12)
- 2 UCLA (27-6)
- 15 Belmont (20-10)

Indianapolis
April 1

CHAM

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Philadelphia March 17 and 19

Connecticut (27-3) **1**

Albany (21-10) **16**

Kentucky (21-12) **8**

UAB (24-6) **9**

San Diego March 16 and 18

Washington (24-6) **5**

Utah State (23-8) **12**

Illinois (25-6) **4**

Air Force (24-6) **13**

Washington, D.C.

March 24 and 26

Dayton, Ohio March 17 and 19

Michigan State (22-11) **6**

George Mason (23-7) **11**

North Carolina (22-7) **3**

Murray State (24-6) **14**

Greensboro, N.C. March 16 and 18

Wichita State (24-8) **7**

Seton Hall (18-11) **10**

Tennessee (21-7) **2**

Winthrop (23-7) **15**

Indianapolis

April 1

Indianapolis
April 3

MINNEAPOLIS

Philadelphia March 17 and 19

Villanova (25-4) **1**

Monmouth (18-14)/Hampton (16-15)* **16**

Arizona (19-12) **8**

Wisconsin (19-11) **9**

Salt Lake City March 16 and 18

Nevada (27-5) **5**

Montana (23-6) **12**

Boston College (26-7) **4**

Pacific (24-7) **13**

Minneapolis

March 24 and 26

Jacksonville March 16 and 18

Oklahoma (20-8) **6**

Wisconsin-Milwaukee (21-8) **11**

Florida (27-6) **3**

South Alabama (24-6) **14**

Dayton, Ohio March 17 and 19

Georgetown (21-9) **7**

Northern Iowa (23-9) **10**

Ohio State (25-5) **2**

Davidson (20-10) **15**

PION

*Game played March 14

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TIP sheet

An overview
of the bracket
By Mike DeCourcy

Quick picks to win **SIX**

If you're looking for the next champion, it's probably on this list:

1. Connecticut. As was the case when the Huskies won the championship in 2004, they are not scheduled to face a serious challenger until the Elite Eight, when North Carolina is the likely opponent.

2. Duke. To win it all, Duke will need one or two of J.J. Redick's big-time performances. But given how vacant the Atlanta region is, the Blue Devils might not need those until they arrive in Indianapolis for the Final Four.

3. Memphis. The Tigers wanted that No. 1 seed. So here it is, with a price: the toughest of the four regions.

4. Villanova. If star guard Allan Ray is himself, the Wildcats will have a good chance to advance. But it'll be a difficult road with Boston College, Ohio State and Florida lurking as Final Four threats.

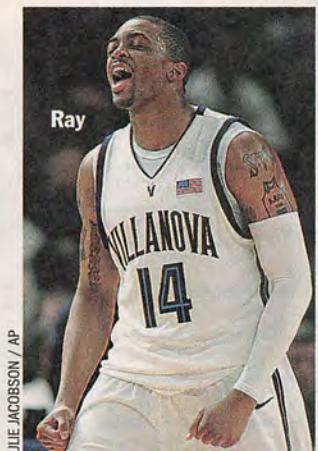
5. Kansas. The poll voters never quite got how good this team is. The committee missed, too. The Jayhawks probably are too young to win the championship, but they're too talented to dismiss.

6. UCLA. Ben Howland's Pittsburgh teams advanced without elite talent. These Bruins don't have that deficiency. They have the best two-man backcourt and enough size and athleticism up front.

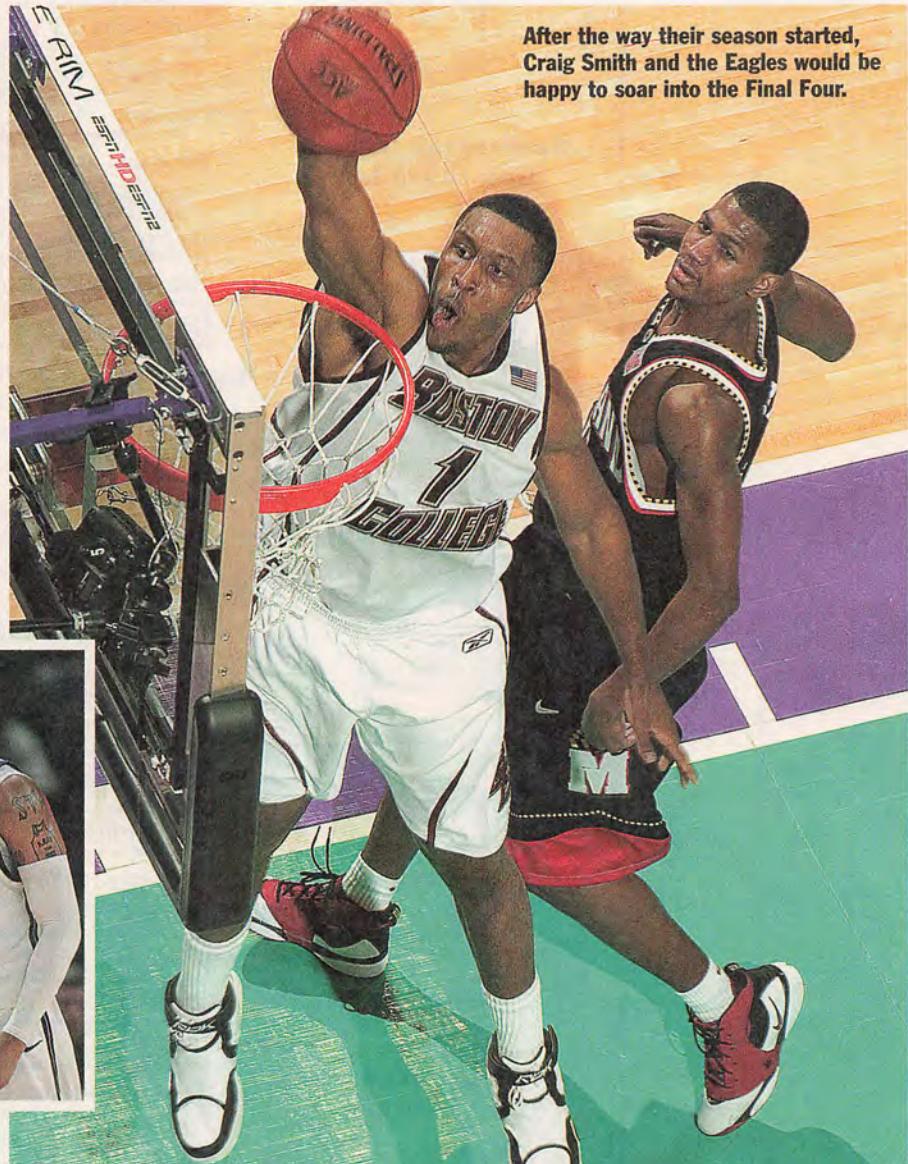
7. Ohio State. Shooting guard Je'Kel Foster is 5-of-43 from 3-point range over the past six games. But even with that slump, the Buckeyes still nearly won the Big Ten Tournament. They are sound in every department.

8. Texas. The Longhorns have flaws. They also have P.J. Tucker. But this team does not handle adversity well. If something goes wrong, it goes all wrong. Can it go all right for six games in a row?

9. North Carolina. If the Tar Heels can make it to Indy, they won't be there for show.



JULIE JACOBSON / AP



A few more for the Final Four

There's almost always one team in the Final Four that's pleased simply to be there: **Boston College.** It can beat every team in its bracket but not every team in the field.

Florida. The Gators are a bit fragile, but Joakim Noah is a spectacular talent.

Pitt. If it escapes the first week, the second can be only slightly more daunting.

Gonzaga. The Zags drew the toughest No. 14 seed—Atlantic 10 Tournament champ Xavier in the first round—but they have the potential to go far.

▲ North Carolina has averaged 84.7 points in its past 10 games ▼ West Virginia F Mike Gansey has made one or zero 3s in seven of his past 10 games

Don't say goodbye to them just yet

The double-digits seeds with the best chance to stick around:

- 10** Seton Hall
- 15** Winthrop
- 11** Wisconsin-Milwaukee
- 10** Alabama
- 10** N.C. State
- 10** South Alabama

BLOG ALERT

L The good thing about the controversy regarding the number of mid-major entrants is that it served as a cover for the committee's horrendous seeding work.

Mike DeCourcy and our other bloggers will have plenty more to say during the NCAA tourney—check it all out at sportingnews.com.

Tourney picks

Final Four picks in red

Can our top college hoops minds beat a top computer mind when it comes to filling out a bracket? Computer programmer Tim Chamberlain, who has won TSN's office pool the past two years, submits his picks based on a head-to-head stats generator. To view everyone's complete bracket, go to: sportingnews.com/bracket.

Mike DeCourcy
Senior writer

Tim Brando
SNR host

Kyle Veltrop
Associate editor

Computer stats
generator

ATLANTA

Duke	Duke	Duke	George Washington
Syracuse	LSU	LSU	LSU
West Virginia	West Virginia	West Virginia	Iowa
Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas

OAKLAND

Memphis	Memphis	Memphis	Memphis
Kansas	Kansas	Pittsburgh	Kansas
Indiana	Gonzaga	San Diego State	Gonzaga
UCLA	UCLA	UCLA	UCLA

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Connecticut	Connecticut	Connecticut	Connecticut
Illinois	Illinois	Washington	Washington
North Carolina	Michigan State	North Carolina	North Carolina
Seton Hall	Seton Hall	Tennessee	Tennessee

MINNEAPOLIS

Villanova	Villanova	Villanova	Villanova
Boston College	Boston College	Boston College	Boston College
Florida	Florida	Florida	Florida
Ohio State	Ohio State	Ohio State	Ohio State

CHAMPIONSHIP

Connecticut over Duke	Texas over Connecticut	Villanova over Texas	Connecticut over Memphis
-----------------------	------------------------	----------------------	--------------------------

The teams that are well-stocked with KEY INGREDIENTS for NCAA Tournament success

GREAT GUARDS

Multiple backcourt players who can score, distribute and control the tempo.

1. Villanova
2. UCLA
3. Tennessee
4. Iona

POST POWER

Multiple big men who can establish a presence on the low block and overwhelm foes with size.

1. LSU
2. Texas
3. Connecticut
4. Boston College

SHOOTING PROWESS

Multiple players who are proficient and efficient from 3-point range.

1. Marquette
2. Tennessee
3. Villanova
4. West Virginia

BIG-GAME EXPERIENCE

Multiple players who are upperclassmen and have experience winning postseason games.

1. Connecticut
2. Michigan State
3. Illinois
4. Duke

—Kyle Veltrop

RANKING THE REGIONS

1 **Oakland.** There are five legitimate Final Four threats in the region, and No. 8 seed **Arkansas** is more talented than teams seeded as high as No. 2 elsewhere (that means you, Tennessee). If the 4-5 matchup is Pittsburgh-Kansas, how can any other region claim to compete?



MARK HUMPHREY / AP

2 **Minneapolis.** The inclusion of Boston College as a No. 4 and Georgetown as a No. 7 spruces up this bracket's case as toughest. But there is weakness at No. 6 (Oklahoma), No. 8 (Arizona) and No. 12 (Montana).

3 **Washington, D.C.** The presence of North Carolina will lead to some immediate (and incorrect) assessments of this region's strength. Honestly, it seems as if UConn coach Jim Calhoun picked this region. Tennessee did not win the SEC regular-season or tournament title and lost to three teams ranked between 51-100 in the RPI. The Vols might be the least accomplished No. 2 seed this decade.

4 **Atlanta.** Aside from the top two seeds, the only place where this bracket is imposing is at No. 8, the inexplicable position handed to George Washington after the Colonials finished 26-2. —M.D.

ATLANTIC REGION

Previews by
Kyle Veltrop

TOP PLAYERS

- 1. G J.J. Redick**
Duke, 6-4, Sr.
- 2. F Glen Davis**
LSU, 6-9, So.
- 3. F Leon Powe**
California, 6-8, So.
- 4. F Shelden Williams**
Duke, 6-9, Sr.
- 5. F P.J. Tucker**
Texas, 6-5, Jr.
- 6. F LaMarcus Aldridge**
Texas, 6-10, So.
- 7. C Kevin Pittsnogle**
West Virginia, 6-11, Sr.
- 8. F Mike Gansey**
West Virginia, 6-4, Sr.
- 9. G Steve Burtt**
Iona, 6-0, Sr.



GEORGE WIDMAN / AP

10. G Ibrahim Jaaber

Penn, 6-2, Jr.

Jaaber is a deadly 3-point shooter who also is effective inside the arc. He might be the most athletic player in the Ivy League. That doesn't impress you? What about this: Jaaber is tied for second in the nation with 3.4 steals per game.

First 4 story lines

J.J. Redick shoots for a championship. Redick will close his Duke career with plenty of records and awards, but will he leave with a national title? After suffering through a shooting slump late in the regular season, Redick was terrific in the ACC Tournament. But he's only a 37.2 percent shooter—31.0 percent from 3-point range—in 11 career NCAA Tournament games and has lost in the Sweet 16 twice.

Texas shoots for revenge. In the most hyped nonconference game of the year, the Longhorns were embarrassed by the Blue Devils in a 31-point loss on December 10. Texas likely will be able to navigate through a manageable draw in nearby Dallas, but to get another crack at Duke the Horns first might have to deal with another rematch—against West Virginia, a team Texas beat by one in November.

More March cheer for the Mountaineers? West Virginia wrote one of the best stories of last year's tournament by raining 3s on Creighton, Wake Forest and Texas Tech before Louisville finally caught up to the Mountaineers in the second half of an Elite Eight classic. Most of those mountain men are back, including Kevin Pittsnogle and Mike Gansey. This is an experienced team that proved it can play with anyone, anywhere this season.

Upset alert. UNC Wilmington has the goods to beat George Washington, Iona and its top-notch backcourt

1-minute guide

Best shooter: J.J. Redick, Duke. Even a Tar Heels fan has to admit this is the guy you want coming off a screen and firing the big shot.

Best freshman: Tyrus Thomas, LSU. He is freakishly athletic for a 6-9 player and, along with Glen Davis, gives LSU an inside presence that can overwhelm most opponents. Thomas, though, has been out nearly three weeks because of a sprained ankle. Is his wheel ready to roll?

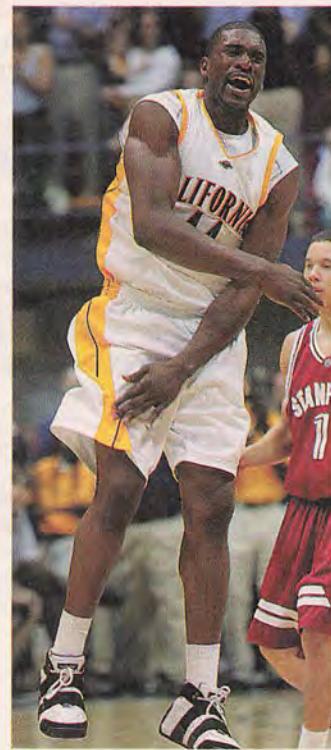
Best big-game player: Gerry McNamara, Syracuse. You really don't need any more evidence, do you?

Most inconsistent player:

Daniel Gibson, Texas. How does one of the most talented players in the country score 37 points in one game but fail to reach double figures in 11 others?

Player you'll fall in love with:

Leon Powe, California. He has overcome a rough upbringing and multiple knee surgeries to become



MARIO JOSE SANCHEZ / AP

one of the fiercest, most productive players in the land. Who doesn't love that?

Most to prove: George Washington. The Colonials' 26-2 record got plenty of skeptical looks—especially from the tournament selection committee—because GW's nonconference schedule and the Atlantic 10 were unquestionably weak. The Colonials and rising coach Karl Hobbs can show they are for real by giving Duke all it can handle in Round 2.

Best bet to pull an upset: Iona. LSU has so much size, Gaels coach Jeff Ruland might be tempted to suit up. But Thomas' health is in question for the Tigers, and Iona has an elite pair of guards in Steve Burtt and Ricky Soliver. Don't forget, the Tigers bombed in the NCAAs last season.

Made-for-TV matchup: It would take a lot for a weary Syracuse team to make it to the second week, but a Sweet 16 matchup of Redick and McNamara trading 23-footers would be sweet, indeed.



DAVID J. PHILLIP / AP

Cal F Leon Powe has averaged 24.2 points in the past 10 games ▼ N.C. State has hit 31 of its last 118 3s ▲ LSU F Glen Davis has double doubles in nine of his past 11 games

First 4 story lines

Memphis tries to turn it back on. The Tigers built their case for a No. 1 seed during the nonconference season by playing Alabama, UCLA, Duke, Cincinnati, Gonzaga, Texas and Tennessee. But the past few months, Memphis has gotten fat on the likes of Marshall, Rice and Southern Miss. The Tigers are an extremely talented team but also an extremely young one. They can't afford lulls in their play.

It's the year of the Zags ... or is it? Gonzaga has a scoring machine in Adam Morrison and a productive big man in J.P. Batista. If the Zags get past first-round foe Xavier, which won the Atlantic 10 Tournament, they likely will meet Indiana, which is seeded too high, in the second round. Before you get ahead of yourself and look any further, let Gonzaga get to the Sweet 16. That's a place it hasn't been since 2001.

The Bruins' backcourt. UCLA has been hit hard by injuries, and it isn't all that experienced. But the Bruins have a stud guard combo in point man Jordan Farmar and wing Arron Afflalo. UCLA will have a decided backcourt edge over Gonzaga in the Elite Eight if the bracket plays out as it is seeded.

Kids corner. Three members of the SPORTING NEWS' All-Freshman team reside in this region: Kansas' Brandon Rush, Marquette's Dominic James and Memphis' Shawne Williams. Other first-year players who have prominent roles include the Jayhawks' Mario Chalmers and Julian Wright, the Tigers' Antonio Anderson and Chris Douglas-Roberts, Alabama's Richard Hendrix, Pitt's Sam Young and Levance Fields and UCLA's Luc Richard Mbah a Moute. Freshmen aren't always expected to come up big this time of year, but these guys don't have much choice if they want their teams to advance.

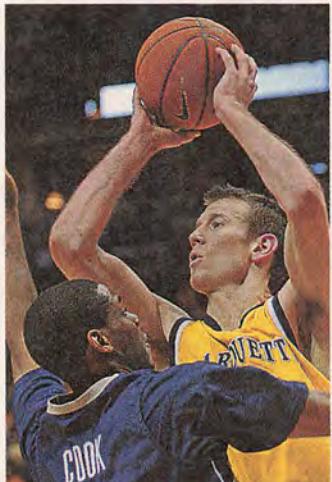
1-minute guide

Best shooter: Steve Novak, Marquette. With apologies to West Virginia's Kevin Pittsnogle, Novak is the best-shooting big man in college basketball. He can shoot over any defender and get clean looks. If you don't believe how dangerous he is, ask a UConn Husky.

Best freshman: Brandon Rush, Kansas. He still has nights when he needs to be more assertive, but the sweet-shooting Rush is growing comfortable in his role as the young Jayhawks' go-to guy.

Best big-game player: Adam Morrison, Gonzaga. He averaged 26.0 points in two NCAA Tournament games last season. And this year, Morrison scored 43 against Michigan State, 43 at Washington, 34 at Memphis and 34 against Stanford.

Most inconsistent player: Patrick O'Bryant, Bradley. A skilled 7-footer who towers over Missouri



DARREN HAUCK / AP

Valley foes shouldn't fail to reach 10 points so frequently. O'Bryant too often turns passive and fails to draw fouls.

Player you'll fall in love with: Robert Vaden, Indiana. Marco Killingsworth may be the Hoosiers' star, but Vaden is their most complete player. He'll give up some

REGION OAKLAND



TOM GANNAM / AP

Morrison and the Zags want to be No. 1 when it's all over, but even getting to the Sweet 16 has been tough.

TOP PLAYERS

1. F Adam Morrison
Gonzaga, 6-8, Jr.

2. F Rodney Carney
Memphis, 6-7, Sr.

3. G Ronnie Brewer
Arkansas, 6-7, Jr.

4. G Arron Afflalo
UCLA, 6-5, So.

5. G Jordan Farmar
UCLA, 6-2, So.



JIM BARCUS / AP

inches when he guards a power forward, but he also will take his defender beyond the 3-point line.

Most to prove: Bill Self, Kansas. It's unfair to expect a great run from the Jayhawks, who start only freshmen and sophomores. But Kansas fans expect a lot, and they still wake up in cold sweat because of last year's NCAA Tournament, when Self's team lost to Bucknell and former Kansas coach Roy Williams won it all at North Carolina.

Best bet to pull an upset: San Diego State. Coach Steve Fisher has 20 NCAA Tournament victories. Forward Marcus Slaughter is a double double machine, and Brandon Heath is a perimeter threat. Mike Davis might be Indiana's coach for just one more game.

Made-for-TV matchup: Morrison vs. Indiana ... Morrison vs. UCLA ... Morrison vs. Memphis (again). The longer Gonzaga stays alive, the more CBS gets its wish: as much Morrison as possible.

6. F Caleb Green
Oral Roberts, 6-8, Jr.

Once this 240-pounder makes his move toward the basket, all opponents can do is foul. He leads the nation in free throws made and attempted. Green could exploit Memphis in the paint.

7. G Brandon Rush
Kansas, 6-7, Fr.

8. C J.P. Batista
Gonzaga, 6-9, Sr.

9. G Darius Washington
Memphis, 6-2, So.

10. F Marco Killingsworth
Indiana, 6-7, Sr.

WASHINGTON ON D.C. REGION

TOP PLAYERS

1. F Tyler Hansbrough

North Carolina, 6-9, Fr.

2. G Brandon Roy

Washington, 6-6, Sr.

3. G Chris Lofton

Tennessee, 6-2, So.

4. G Dee Brown

Illinois, 6-0, Sr.

5. F Rudy Gay

Connecticut, 6-9, So.

6. G/F Shannon Brown

Michigan State, 6-4, Jr.

7. G Maurice Ager

Michigan State, 6-5, Sr.

8. C Paul Davis

Michigan State, 6-11, Sr.



WADE PAYNE / AP

9. G C.J. Watson

Tennessee, 6-2, Sr.

Overshadowed by Lofton, Watson has been almost as integral to the Vols' turnaround. He provides long-range shooting on offense and ball pressure on defense. The Vols like to push the tempo, and Watson makes sure they take care of the ball.

10. F Nate Harris

Utah State, 6-7, Sr.

First 4 story lines

No. 1 Huskies aim for No. 2. Rashad Anderson, Josh Boone, Hilton Armstrong and Denham Brown are in good position to become the first players



KEITH SRAKOCIC / AP

Brown is one of four Huskies hoping to grab hold of their second NCAA title.

1-minute guide

Best shooter: Chris Lofton, Tennessee. His quick release and strength allow him to put up shots even when he's covered. Sending him to the line means conceding two points.

Best freshman (not named Tyler Hansbrough): Jon Brockman, Washington. He doesn't have a prominent role with the Huskies, but Brockman is a rugged banger who knows what he does best. He leads the team in rebounds.



ELAINE THOMPSON / AP

Best big-game player: Maurice Ager, Michigan State. He averaged 18.2 points in five NCAA Tournament games last season. This season, Ager had 36 points against Gonzaga, 22 against Boston College, 25 at home against Iowa and 26 at home against Ohio State. He averaged 29.0 in two games against Indiana.

Most inconsistent player: Kelly Whitney, Seton Hall. The Pirates have a vastly improved backcourt in Jamar Nutter and Donald Copeland, but they'll need Whitney to provide consistent production inside. In his past two games, he had 21 points in a huge win against Pitt, then netted three points and five fouls in a Big East Tournament loss to Rutgers.

Player you'll fall in love with (again): Dee Brown, Illinois. He shoots from long, long range. He snatches balls from passing lanes. He zips around in the open court. He's a bigger pest than your kid brother. And he does it all with an orange smile.

Most to prove: Rudy Gay,

to win two national titles since Jeff Sheppard and Allen Edwards did it for Kentucky in 1996 and '98. UConn needs consistent scoring from Anderson and Brown and rebounding and blocked shots from Boone and Armstrong. None of the four is a star, but each could provide invaluable contributions to the UConn cause.

And a freshman shall lead them. North Carolina is looking to repeat as the national champion, but it will have to do so by relying on star freshman Tyler Hansbrough. He won't be expected to do it all by himself—though sometimes it seems that he can—but 20 points and 10 rebounds a game aren't too much to expect. A collision with Connecticut in the Elite Eight appears to be in Carolina's future.

Tennessee must stop a slide. Perhaps the most curious seed handed out by the selection committee was the No. 2 slot given to the Vols, who have lost four of their past six games. This looks like a tired team, one that may be feeling the effects of playing all season at a breakneck pace without great depth.

Will March smile on Izzo again? Coach Tom Izzo has a 23-7 NCAA Tournament record, and he has taken Michigan State to four Final Fours in the past seven years. But this has been a trying season for the Spartans. They have three star players—Paul Davis, Maurice Ager and Shannon Brown—who average 54.8 points combined. Unfortunately for State, it has little else.

Connecticut. OK, we get it: He's the most talented player in the country. So why can't he carry his team from time to time?

Best bet to pull an upset:

Air Force. All Illinois does is win,

but there still is an uneasiness about the Illini. The Falcons are well-drilled in their first year under coach Jeff Bzdelik, and Dan Nwaelele is the best of a very potent



BRYAN OLLER / AP

bunch of Falcons shooters.

Made-for-TV matchup:

Connecticut vs. North Carolina.

It will be worth the wait if the past two national champions meet in the Elite Eight.

▲ Denham Brown, UConn's No. 5 scorer, has averaged 19.0 points in the past four games ▼ Rudy Gay, UConn's top scorer, has averaged 10.8 points in the same stretch

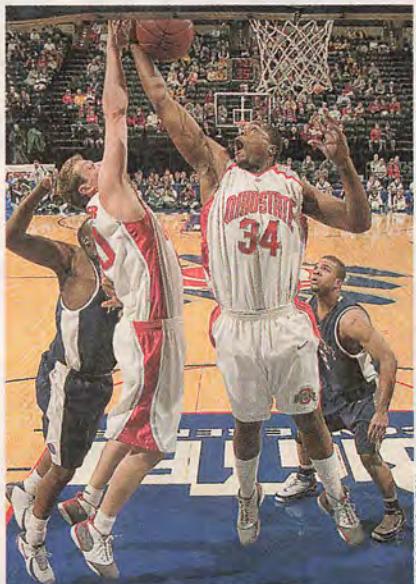
First 4 story lines

The deadeye's damaged eye. If sharpshooter Allan Ray, who sustained an eye injury in the Big East Tournament, is good to go, Villanova will have enough quickness, ballhandling, defense and firepower to win it all. If Ray is limited, the Wildcats will be in big trouble. He is one of the best players in the nation, and the Wildcats need all he has to give. Why isn't this team ever whole—or even reasonably close to it?

The Buckeyes look for their touch. After closing the regular season in strong fashion, Ohio State sputtered in the Big Ten Tournament, its trip to the championship game notwithstanding. The Buckeyes jacked up 85 3s in the three games and connected on only 21 of them (24.7 percent).

Terence Dials is the team's only interior presence, so it needs those long-distance shots to fall.

Can Billy Donovan regain his tourney magic? Since taking Florida on a surprising run to the national title game in 2000, Donovan has found the NCAAs unkind



Usually, Dials (34) is Ohio State's only man in the paint, which could be its downfall.

to his Gators. They haven't survived the first weekend in any of the past five tourneys and often have been upset (Creighton '02, Manhattan '04) or embarrassed (Temple '01, Michigan State '03). This edition of the Gators is most like Donovan's 2000 team; it is a club built more on balance and depth and less on individualism.

Craig Smith, closing strong.

For four seasons, Boston College's Smith has been highly productive and mostly overlooked. He appears intent on making everyone notice his final moments in college. No player was more impressive than the chiseled Smith during the conference tournaments; he averaged 21.0 points, 13.3 rebounds

and 6.0 assists, and he shot 60.5 percent from the field. BC ended North Carolina's eight-game winning streak and led Duke with less than 2 minutes remaining in the title game. With Smith playing like this, the Eagles are dangerous.

TOP PLAYERS

1. G Randy Foye

Villanova, 6-3, Sr.

2. G Allan Ray

Villanova, 6-2, Sr.

3. F Alando Tucker

Wisconsin, 6-6, Jr.

4. F Nick Fazekas

Nevada, 6-11, Jr.

5. F Craig Smith

Boston College, 6-7, Sr.

6. C Terence Dials

Ohio State, 6-9, Sr.

7. G Hassan Adams

Arizona, 6-4, Sr.



8. F Joah Tucker

Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 6-5, Sr.

Though his former running mate (Ed McCants) and coach (Bruce Pearl) are gone, Tucker and the Panthers are back in the NCAAs after advancing to the Sweet 16 last season.

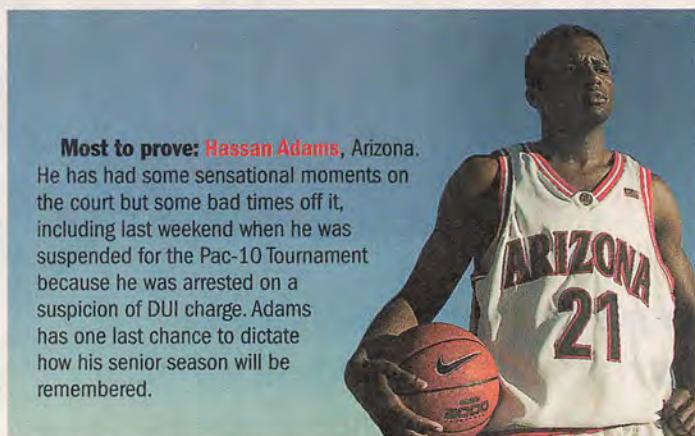
Tucker, who averaged 25.3 points in last season's tourney, has a nice midrange game and is good in transition.

9. F Jared Dudley

Boston College, 6-7, Jr.

10. F Taj Gray

Oklahoma, 6-9, Sr.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

14 points in each of the Eagles' first two conference tournament games, Marshall had just two points in BC's loss to Duke.

Player you'll fall in love with:

Kyle Lowry, Villanova. He uses his ridiculous quickness to knife into the lane and swarm to the ball. He gets knocked down plenty—but always gets up. Pound for pound, he is the toughest guy in college basketball.

Best bet to pull an upset:

Northern Iowa. Georgetown isn't a dynamic offensive team, and the Panthers won't be fazed one bit by being in this position.

Made-for-TV matchup:

Villanova-Boston College. Two big-market teams. A couple of old rivals from BC's Big East days. An elite backcourt (Villanova) vs. a rugged frontcourt (BC).



Prince Fielder,

MLB

They are future stars, ready to infuse new life into baseball. Every team has at least one, and each division has a guy capable of changing the balance of power.

► Breaking in—and



Milwaukee is chock full of youngsters, but Fielder's muscular presence in the middle of the lineup is the biggest reason the Brewers are expected to take another step toward contention. He had 78 homers in his last three minor league stops.

On the field, the conditions are great. There are better lights than in the minors, and the infield is so smooth. No bad hops. The conditions are right to help any player. The off-the-field perks are terrific, too. Who wouldn't want to stay in five-star hotels? And the meal money is great. It's around \$100 a day, so you can get great meals. And I like to eat.

I heard about the Lyle Overbay trade from my wife, who had gone to a local sports bar in San Diego to pick up

snacks. She heard the news while waiting for her order and came

back to Tony Gwynn Jr.'s house, where we were watching the Lakers game, and told me. It was good to hear because it told me I had more of a chance to make this team. At this point, I don't think I'm quite ready, and that's why I work hard every day.

Busting out in the N.L. Central:

Astros: Chris Burke, IF/OF

Cardinals: Yadier Molina, C

Cubs: Ronny Cedeno, SS

Pirates: Paul Maholm, LHP

Reds: Edwin Encarnacion, 3B

ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

breaking out



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

The flamethrowing righthander is considered the best pitching prospect since Doc Gooden. Hernandez's 2.67 ERA in limited work last season—on the heels of his 100 strikeouts in 88 minor league innings—showed that his future is now.

Seattle Mariners

Felix Hernandez,

*When I was
pitching in
Triple-A last
year I realized*

*I could get guys out, and I
could tell I was very close to the big
leagues. Now that I'm here, I love
everything about it and just want to go
out there, pitch and do the best I can.*

Busting out in the A.L. West:

A's: Joe Blanton, RHP

Angels: Ervin Santana, RHP

Rangers: Ian Kinsler, 2B

Brian Anderson, Chicago White Sox

With Anderson waiting in the wings, the world champions didn't hesitate to trade last season's starting center fielder for Jim Thome's big bat. Anderson

figures to add some clout, too—he had two home runs in only 34 at-bats last season.

Busting out in the A.L. Central:

Indians: Fernando Cabrera, RHP

Tigers: Curtis Granderson, OF

Twins: Justin Morneau, 1B

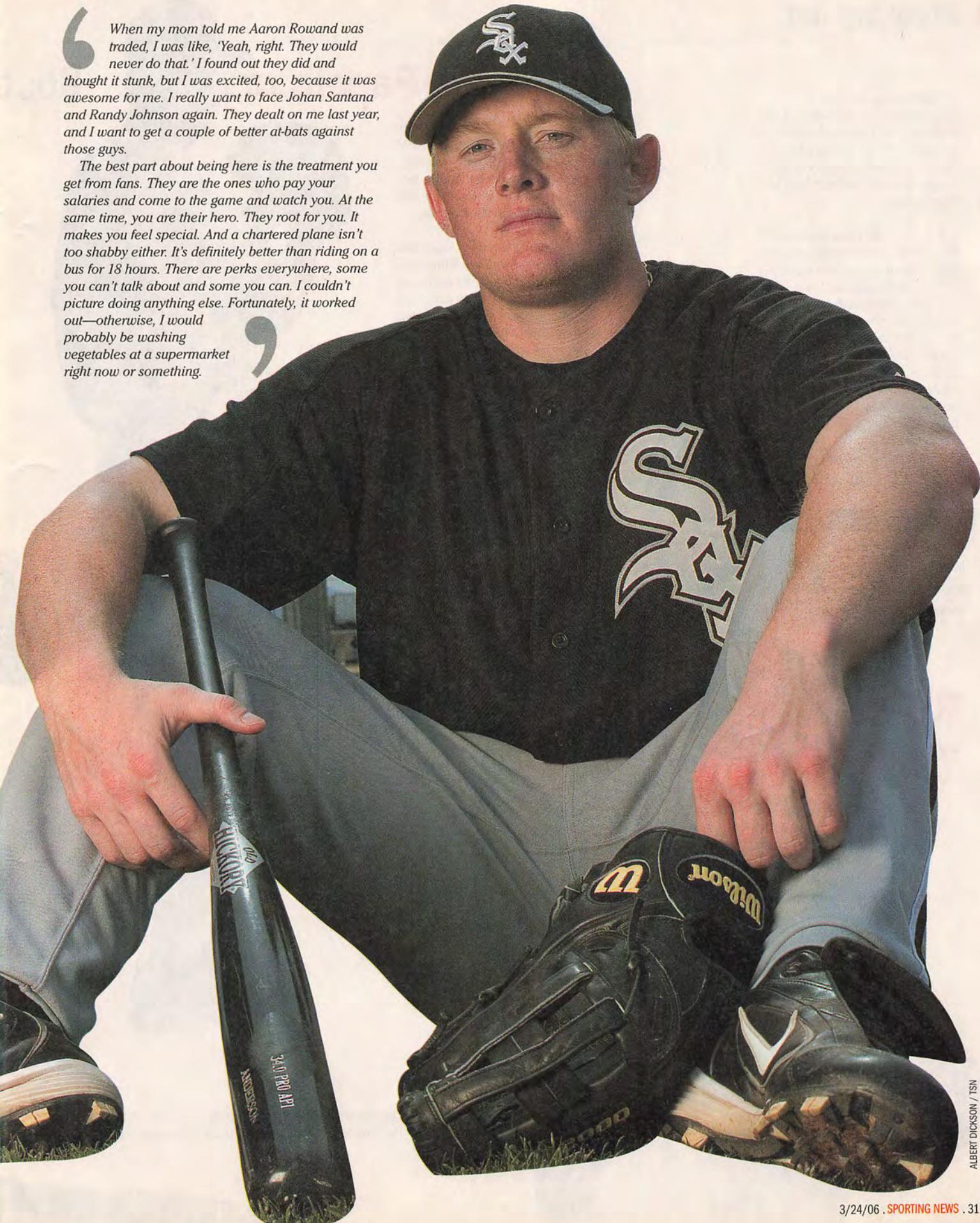
Royals: Mark Teahen, 3B

6

When my mom told me Aaron Rowand was traded, I was like, 'Yeah, right. They would never do that.' I found out they did and thought it stunk, but I was excited, too, because it was awesome for me. I really want to face Johan Santana and Randy Johnson again. They dealt on me last year, and I want to get a couple of better at-bats against those guys.

The best part about being here is the treatment you get from fans. They are the ones who pay your salaries and come to the game and watch you. At the same time, you are their hero. They root for you. It makes you feel special. And a chartered plane isn't too shabby either. It's definitely better than riding on a bus for 18 hours. There are perks everywhere, some you can't talk about and some you can. I couldn't picture doing anything else. Fortunately, it worked out—otherwise, I would probably be washing vegetables at a supermarket right now or something.

,



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Breaking out

This time a year ago, Zimmerman was a student at the University of Virginia. Now he has moved north, where he'll be the Nationals third baseman after hitting near .400 in 58 at-bats last September.

“The best thing about the majors off the field is the meal money and the shoes. Growing up and in college you start getting stuff, but it's nothing like this. Nike and Adidas have given me a whole lot of stuff. On the field I'm excited to play the Yankees and face Mariano Rivera. He has been so good for so long, and he only has two pitches! They must be unbelievable.

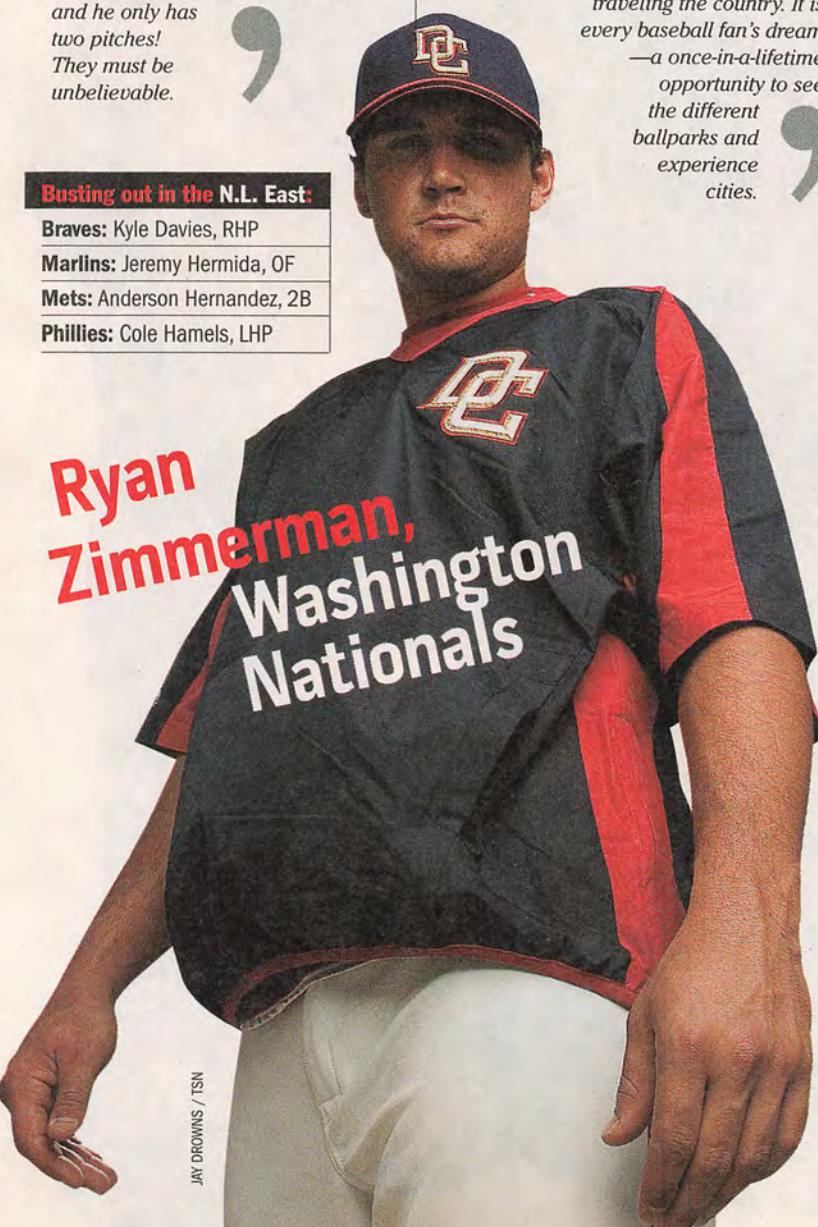
Busting out in the N.L. East:

Braves: Kyle Davies, RHP

Marlins: Jeremy Hermida, OF

Mets: Anderson Hernandez, 2B

Phillies: Cole Hamels, LHP



JAY DROWNS / TSN

Jon Papelbon,

Bost

The Red Sox have gotten a taste of what Papelbon can do—he was 3-1 with a 2.65 ERA last season, plus he pitched four scoreless innings in the American League Division Series.

“I didn't feel like I really had arrived until my third major league start when I did all the little things that go into being a big-league pitcher, including shutting down Vladimir Guerrero—who I can't wait to face again. I'm also looking forward to traveling the country. It is every baseball fan's dream—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see the different ballparks and experience cities.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

Contributing: Bill Ladson, Adam McCalvy, Rich Draper, Ian Browne, Scott Merkin and Doug Miller of MLB.com.

on Red Sox

Busting out in the A.L. East:

Blue Jays: Aaron Hill, 2B

Devil Rays: Scott Kazmir, LHP

Orioles: Chris Ray, RHP

Yankees: Chien-Ming Wang, RHP

The Giants—the oldest team in the National League—can use some youth. Cain, a 21-year-old righthander, allowed opponents only a .151 batting average in seven late-season starts.

My first major league start was against Colorado last year. I threw a 94-mph fastball to Cory Sullivan. It was a ball, but I got him out. That's when I realized I could play at this level. You never really know until you get there. Then in the same game I went against Todd Helton. He took me to 3-1, but I wasn't going to walk him. I threw fourteen pitches before I got him out. I want to match up with him again. It always is fun to go against a guy like that.

Busting out in the N.L. West:

Diamondbacks: Conor Jackson, 1B

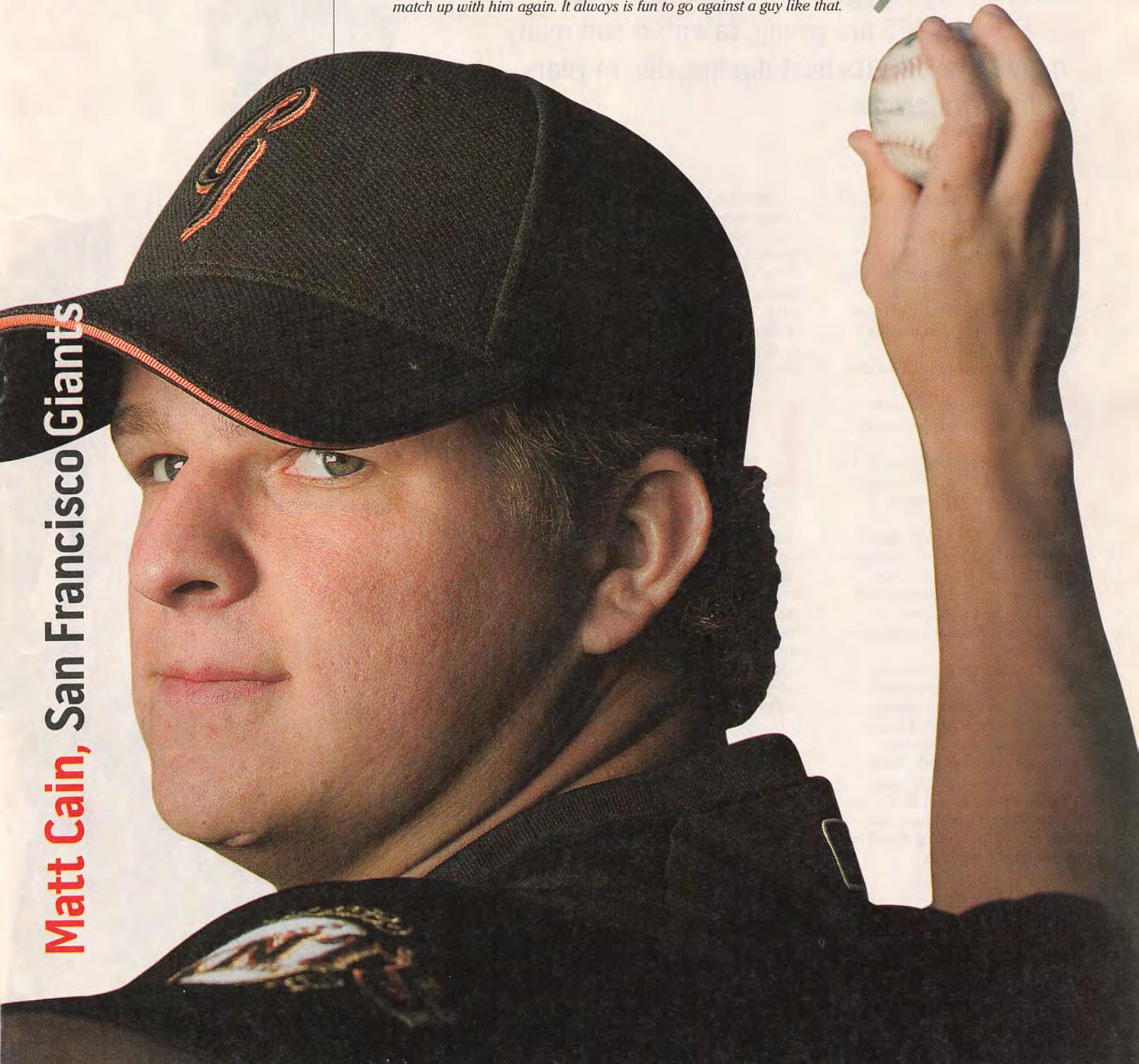
Dodgers: Jason Repko, OF

Padres: Josh Barfield, 2B

Rockies: Garrett Atkins, 3B

ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

Matt Cain, San Francisco Giants



Better rivals

NBA

The Next Big Thing is finally here. Make that the Next Big Things. DWYANE WADE and LEBRON JAMES are young, talented and ready to give the NBA its best dueling duo in years.

By Ira Winderman

When it comes to individual rivalries, at least in the NBA, there is no three-man weave.

"For some reason," Heat coach Pat Riley says, "it's hard for people to get more than two names of phenoms out of their mouths. It was Robertson and West, Chamberlain and Russell, Bird and Magic."

And at the 2003 NBA draft, Riley acknowledges, "it was James and Anthony."

But over the past three years, that has changed. LeBron and Carmelo has given way to LeBron and Dwyane.

"That's the way it seems like it's worked out," Wade says. "We're both in the Eastern Conference; our records are up there. We see each other four times a year, and the Nuggets and Carmelo—we only see them twice a year."

The association between the Heat's Wade and the Cavaliers' James is a friendship, a rivalry, and even more than that, it's a constant.

When Wade won the Skills Challenge at last month's All-Star Saturday, James was runner-up. Then James was named MVP of the All-Star Game the next night, but Wade scored the winning basket for the Eastern Conference.

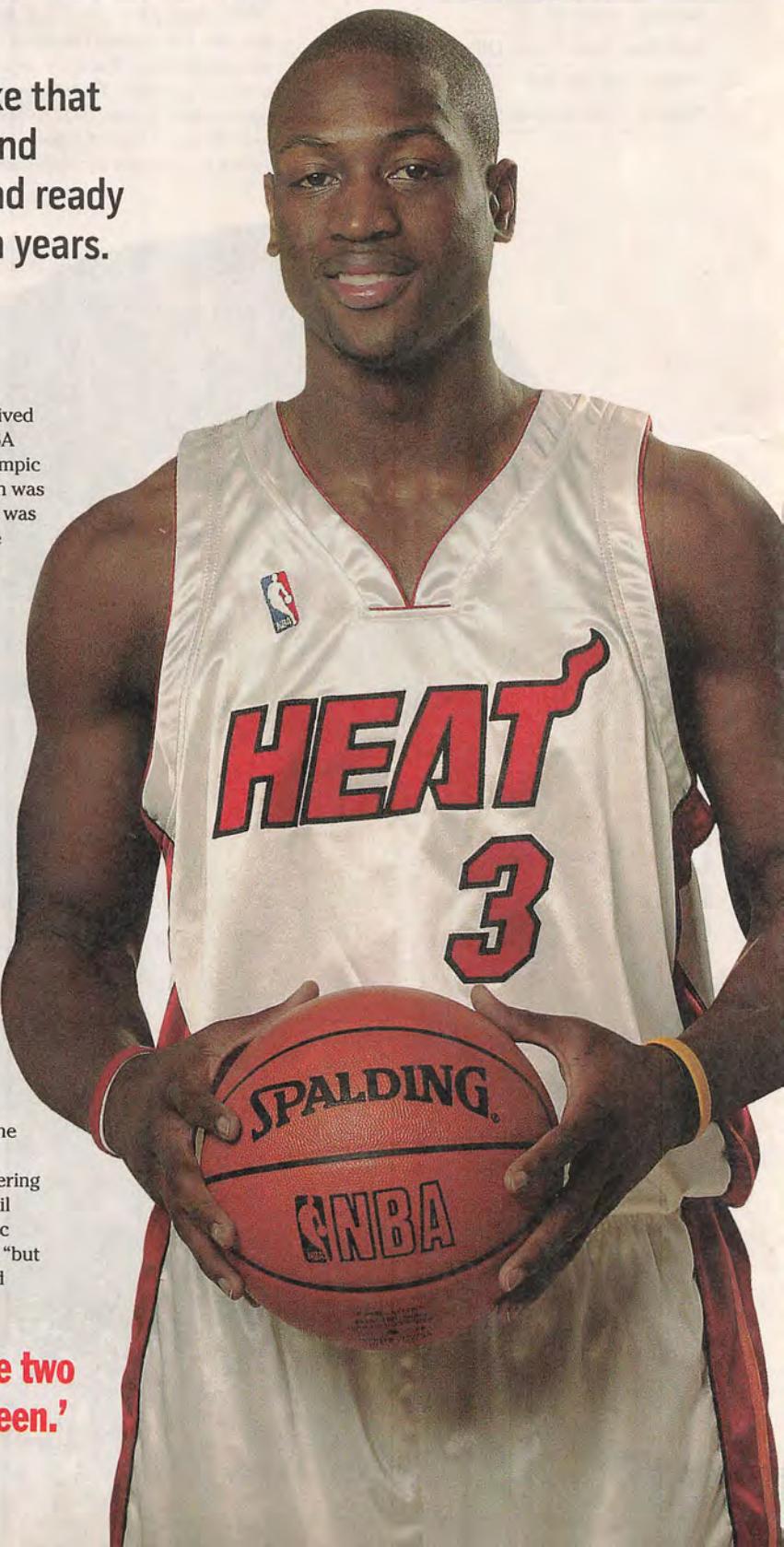
Days later, when Wade received his invitation package from USA Basketball, he delayed his Olympic decision until another decision was made. "One of my main things was making sure certain guys were going," he says. "I had a lot of conversations with LeBron. I think we both wanted each other to be there."

L eBron and Dwyane. James and Wade. They are muscled. They are aggressive. They are charismatic. They are young.

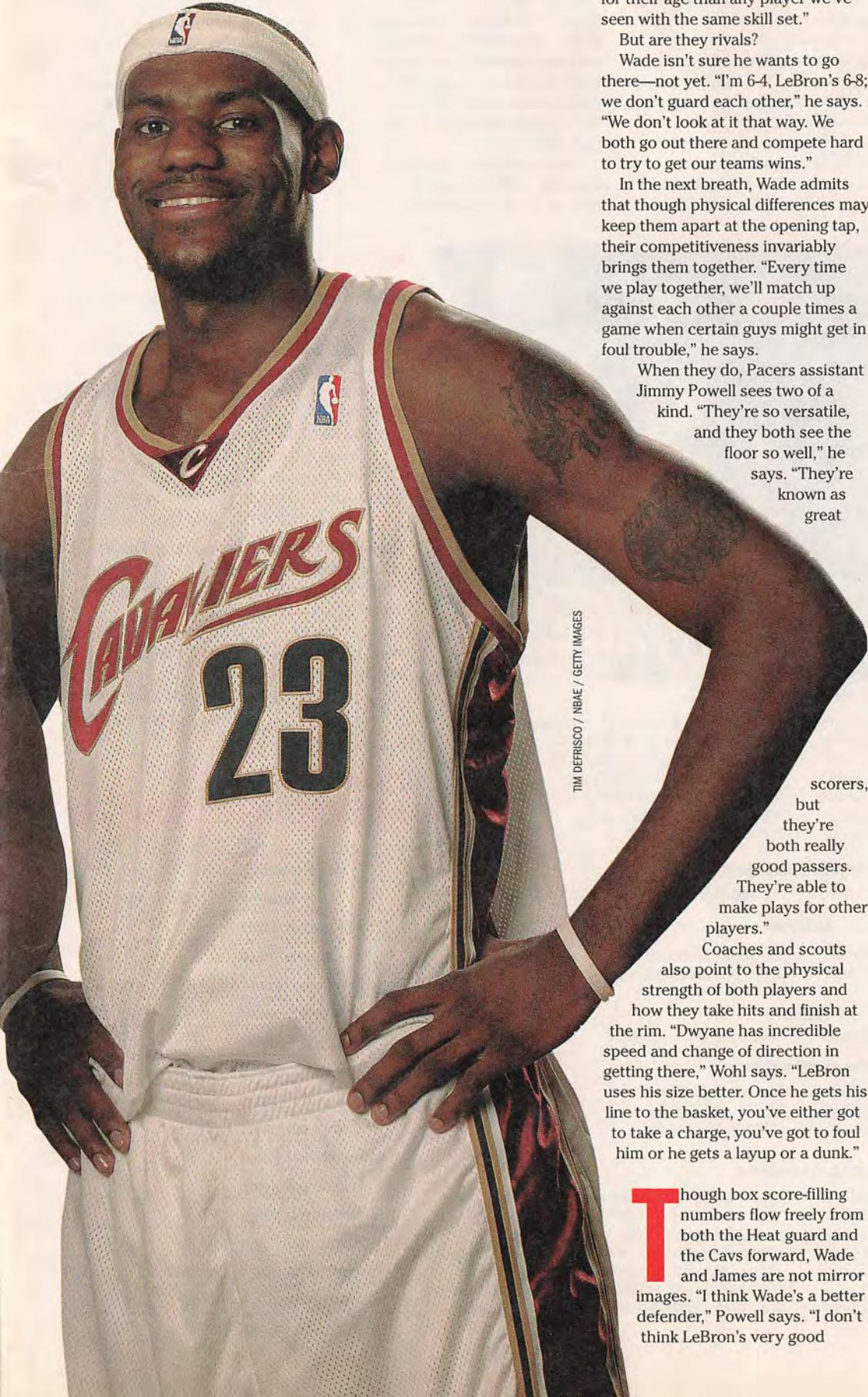
"They're like two young running backs who arrive in the NFL at the same time," Celtics assistant coach Dave Wohl says. "Dwyane is more like a shifty running back. He hits the hole after finding where the hole is. LeBron is more like Emmitt Smith. He just hits the hole and drags three tacklers with him and gets the yardage."

Together, they are moving the NBA's chains.

"We don't have much pioneering anymore these days," says Trail Blazers scout and former Magic general manager John Gabriel, "but maybe in size and strength and



'In size and strength and athleticism these two are different from any player we've ever seen.'



athleticism these two are different from any player we've ever seen. They are more poised and mature for their age than any player we've seen with the same skill set."

But are they rivals?

Wade isn't sure he wants to go there—not yet. "I'm 6-4, LeBron's 6-8; we don't guard each other," he says. "We don't look at it that way. We both go out there and compete hard to try to get our teams wins."

In the next breath, Wade admits that though physical differences may keep them apart at the opening tap, their competitiveness invariably brings them together. "Every time we play together, we'll match up against each other a couple times a game when certain guys might get in foul trouble," he says.

When they do, Pacers assistant Jimmy Powell sees two of a kind. "They're so versatile, and they both see the floor so well," he says. "They're known as great

TIM DEFRISCO / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

scorers, but they're both really good passers. They're able to make plays for other players."

Coaches and scouts also point to the physical strength of both players and how they take hits and finish at the rim. "Dwyane has incredible speed and change of direction in getting there," Wohl says. "LeBron uses his size better. Once he gets his line to the basket, you've either got to take a charge, you've got to foul him or he gets a layup or a dunk."

Tough box score-filling numbers flow freely from both the Heat guard and the Cavs forward, Wade and James are not mirror images. "I think Wade's a better defender," Powell says. "I don't think LeBron's very good

defensively; it's one of his weaknesses.

"I think LeBron has better range on his shooting. I think Dwyane is a great midrange shooter. LeBron has really worked hard and has very good range on his 3-point shot and seems to be settling for that quite a bit, where Dwyane is always going to take it to the lane and get to the free throw line."

Wade not only isn't a 3-point shooter, he rarely considers taking one. Many see that as a reason he has emerged as the better closer of the two. James recently scored only 14 fourth quarter points in a five-game stretch and hasn't hit a single buzzer-beating, game-winning shot in his first three seasons.

In fact, he is 2-for-15 in his career on potential game-tying or go-ahead shots in the final 10 seconds, according to Elias Sports Bureau.

So be it, says James. "I don't feel too much pressure. I never have. I don't believe in pressure."

Wade, though, seemingly thrives on it and already has supplied a career's worth of final-seconds glory. There was a buzzer-beating game-winner in his playoff debut two seasons ago against the Hornets. There was a game-winning jumper at Madison Square Garden last season that had him wagging a finger at actor Matthew Modine. And this season Wade scored the Heat's final 17 points in a win over the Pistons.

Sure, Wade has The Big Decoy to clear the way for open late-game shots, but there's something else: "There's probably a bit of wiring that enables one to really strive to do that," Gabriel says of late-game heroics. "And I think that's true in Dwyane's case. I think also there is a group of young players in this generation that is quick to settle for the jump shot to try to ice it, which is what you might be getting from LeBron."

Like Robertson and West, like Johnson and Bird, James and Wade are defined by more than their offense. There is an entirety to their on-court personas, and that's not merely coincidental.

Wade and James grew close during the 2004 Olympics and referred to themselves as the "young guns." They played off each other at the past two All-Star Games. They even have spoken off the court far more than Johnson or Bird dared

to during their first three seasons. The two even attended a high school game together in Akron, Ohio, last season.

But friends have a way of becoming rivals in the playoffs, and that's just the spark both players—and the league—need to take things to the next level. Wade seems a lock to make the postseason for the third time with the Heat, and the Cavs are on course to make it for the first of many times with James. Wade and

James won't be pitted against each other in The Finals, but it's not difficult to envision a scenario in which the league's soon-to-be top two players are knocking each other off every year—much as Bird and Magic did back in the day. "You kind of knew the Lakers and Boston were going to be in The Finals for about a stretch of five or six years in a row," Heat forward Antoine Walker says. "It was just a matter of who was going to get the best

of each other each year."

In one way, the true test of rivalry and connection hasn't changed much from Bird and Magic to Wade and James today. It is dictated neither by statistics nor front office opinion. Instead, there is a different court of opinion, one that already has Wade and James linked in a way that will endure.

On the walls of a Star Island mansion in Miami, one big man's three little boys have

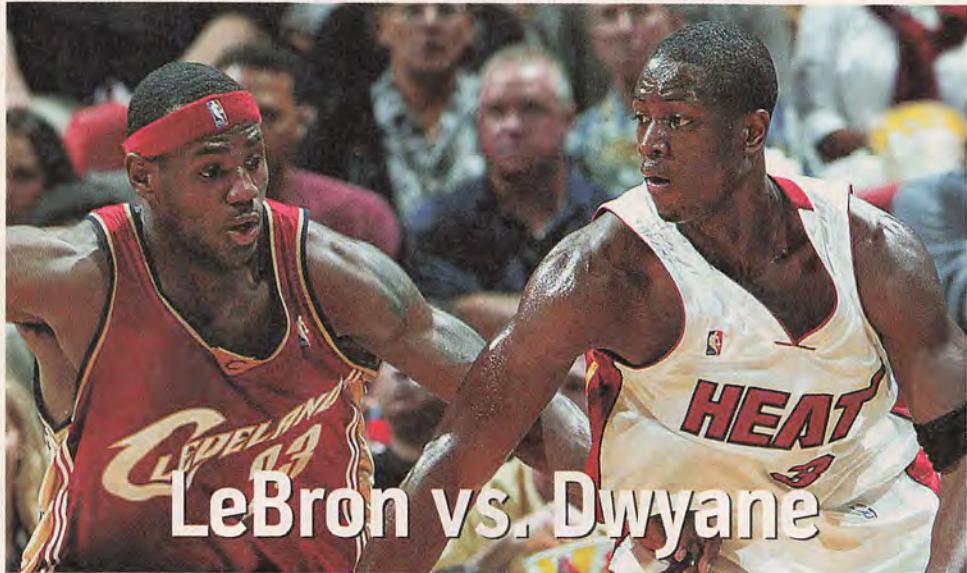
cast their ballots.

In the bedrooms of Shaquille O'Neal's three sons hang posters of Wade and James. "I go in their rooms every morning," O'Neal says, "and there's no posters of me."

Eight-year-old Myles, 5-year-old Shareef and 2-year-old Shaqir have voted. And there is no veto from dad.

"These guys," O'Neal says of Wade and James, "are the future of the game."

TSN



MATCHUPS

Career record vs. each other: Wade's Heat leads James' Cavaliers, 7-3.

A common teammate says: "Neither of them are overly vocal. They just have that quiet confidence about them. I see that bleed over to their teammates. They're both the same. They're quiet, confident. They practice hard."

—Jason Kapono, Heat forward, ex-Cavaliers forward and one of only two players (Cavaliers guard Damon Jones is the other) who has played with both Wade and James in the NBA

Their rivalry is most like ... Oscar Robertson vs. Jerry West? "Don't get me wrong because I think Oscar was the greatest player to ever play the game. But LeBron, good grief, I mean Oscar—at that age—could not have done any more. Jerry West-Wade? That's not an unfair comparison. It isn't."

—Jerry Reynolds, Kings director of player personnel



When he was featured on *Sports Illustrated's* February 18, 2002, cover, with the words, "The Chosen One: High school junior LeBron James would be a lottery pick right now." Sixteen months later, he was the lottery pick—No. 1 overall.

When he had 29 points, 11 rebounds, 11 assists and four blocks in Marquette's 2003 NCAA Elite Eight upset of Kentucky. Former Wildcat Chuck Hayes: "At the time no one really realized we were playing against one of the best players in the world."

VICTOR BAUDZON / TSN ARCHIVES



DILIP VISHWANAT / AP

5.4 ppg, 1.0 rpg, 1.6 apg, 1 bronze medal.

Olympic flameout

7.3 ppg, 1.9 rpg, 2.4 apg, 1 bronze medal.



Nike, Sprite, Powerade and Upper Deck.

Endorsements

Converse, Gatorade, Tops and EA Sports.



ROBERT J. MOORHEAD / AP

Tattoos

Got 'em. Who doesn't?

Never had 'em. Never will?



MEASURABLES

	James	Wade
Age	21	24
Height, weight	6-8, 240	6-4, 212
Drafted	1st, '03	5th, '03
Playoff appearances	0	2
All-Star appearances	2	2
Regular-season record	113-115	143-83
Playoff record	0-0	17-11
Triple doubles	8	2
40-point games	13	4
50-point games	2	0
Points per game	26.0	22.8
Rebounds per game	6.6	5.0
Assists per game	6.6	6.1
Steals per game	1.8	1.6
Blocks per game	0.8	0.8
Field-goal percentage	.455	.482
Free throw percentage	.746	.764
3-point percentage	.329	.244



Dresses a lot like a modern-day Ward Cleaver off the court.

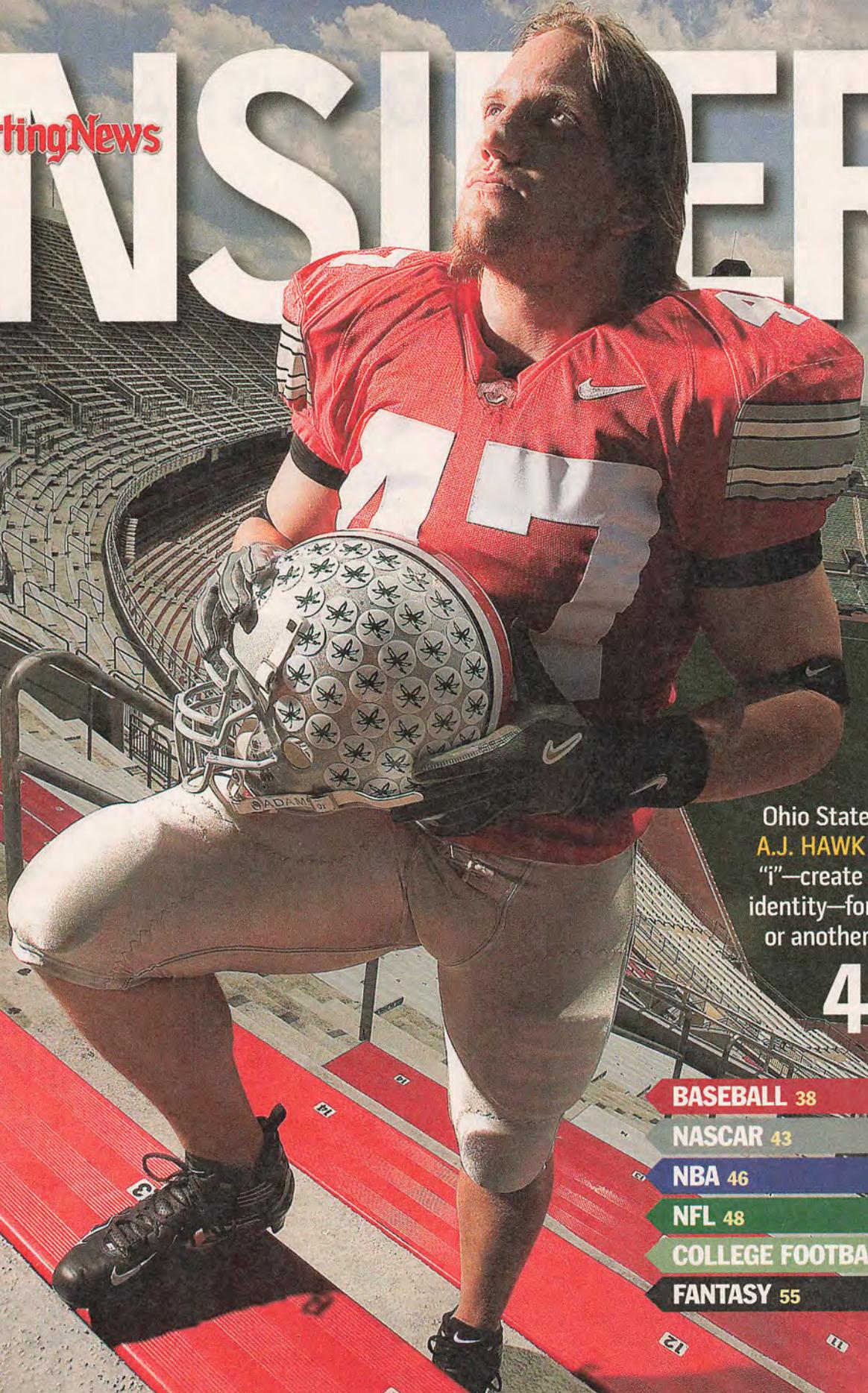
Best pro moment

Averaged 32.8 points, 8.1 rebounds and 7.5 assists in January and—as part of a 7-0 run that led the team into February—brought the Cavs to 10 games above .500 for the first time since February 2005. Cleveland collapsed and fell from the playoff race after reaching that point last season. Don't expect a similar dive this season.

During a 2005 first-round sweep of the Nets, he became one of seven players in league history—joining Cousy, Robertson, Chamberlain, Bird, Magic and Jordan—to average at least 25 points, eight assists and six rebounds while making at least half his shots in a playoff series. Then he did it again in a second-round sweep of the Wizards.

SportingNews

INSIDER



Ohio State linebacker
A.J. HAWK will dot the
"i"—create a defensive
identity—for the Packers
or another NFL team.

48

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NASCAR 43

NBA 46

NFL 48

COLLEGE FOOTBALL 54

FANTASY 55

BASEBALL

INSIDER KEN ROSENTHAL



Barry Bonds tried dressing up like Paula Abdul, but he will need a better disguise to avoid further scrutiny.

The Bonds monster wasn't a solo creation



ERIC RISBERG / AP

Major League Baseball doesn't need to investigate or suspend Barry Bonds. The Flaxseed Kid is coming undone quite nicely on his own.

At 41, his body is a wreck—such a wreck, he might never approach Hank Aaron's record of 755 homers. His election to the Hall of Fame, in the wake of the latest revelations from the new book *Game of Shadows*, has never been in more doubt.

As if all that were not enough, the House Committee on Government Reform finally might want to hear from Bonds after inexplicably declining to subpoena him last year.

Oh, yes, Bonds also faces the possibility of a perjury charge if the government believes he lied to a grand jury or additional trouble with the Internal Revenue Service, which spearheaded the BALCO investigation.

Commissioner Bud Selig couldn't top all of that even if he tried, and he would prefer not to.

Selig, content to let Congress

Bonds should point that finger toward himself.

do his dirty work when the players union stonewalled him on testing, would welcome similar government pressure on Bonds.

An MLB investigation of Bonds, advocated by former commissioner Fay Vincent and confirmed as a possibility by a baseball official, would be too problematic. If Selig went after Bonds, he would be obligated to go after other suspected users of performance-enhancing drugs, including some of the game's most popular players. He also would be obligated to investigate someone he has absolutely no interest in investigating:

Himself.

No, MLB's strategy is more likely to remain unchanged, even if additional allegations about Bonds surface.

Selig can't suspend Bonds, who never has tested positive for performance enhancers and never has admitted using them. Nor can he legislate the past and sprinkle the record books with

asterisks without knowing exactly who did what.

Some may want Selig to invoke his best-interests-of-the-game powers and make Bonds disappear, but those powers do not give the commissioner the right to trample due process. Credible as the book's indictment of Bonds may be, it does not constitute proof.

As Selig said recently, "I'll have to let nature take its course." His point seemed to be that history will be the judge of everything that occurred in the Steroids Era. And Selig darn well knows that in the case of Bonds, the verdict is almost certain to be harsh.

But if, as *Game of Shadows* states, Bonds began using performance enhancers in response to Mark McGwire's record-setting 1998 performance, then Bonds was not much different from lesser players who tried to play catch-up with drugs in order to protect their places in the game.

That was the environment created by MLB, by the players union, by teams—such as Bonds' Giants—that ignored the problem. Each bears responsibility for creating the Bonds monster.

Which isn't to exonerate Bonds, who, according to *Game of Shadows*, made an illegal, willful, pharmaceutically enhanced bid for immortality—then told a grand jury he did not know what he had put into his body.

Down to one good knee, unable to work out the way he once did, Bonds might not have enough left to catch Aaron. MLB no doubt would prefer him to fall short, dreading the controversy that would surround No. 756. But frankly,

the terrible awkwardness of that moment would be what everyone deserves.

TSN

Ken Rosenthal is FOXSports.com senior baseball writer. His Insider column is special to the SPORTING NEWS.

speed reads

Enough with the comparisons of Canada's victory over the United States in the WBC to the "Miracle on Ice." The talent gap between Canada and the U.S. in baseball wasn't as vast as the one between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. in hockey. What's more, the U.S. hockey team went on to win the gold medal, but the Canadian baseball team failed to advance to the second round.

Teams in the WBC shouldn't be forced to adhere to pitch counts. If a country such as South Africa comes up with a hot young pitcher who isn't under a professional contract, it should have the option of pushing him past the mandated limit—and giving itself a better chance to win.

In an era of sober statistical analysis, endless contract talk and growing steroids indignation, the passion displayed by Latin American fans during the WBC is a reminder of what the game is supposed to be about: fun.



BRENNAN LINSLEY / AP

INSIDE DISH

The Red Sox considered playing 3B **Andy Marte** in the outfield before trading him to the Indians, but Cleveland would prefer for Marte to get comfortable in Class AAA instead of changing his position. If Marte is ready by, say, late May, the team's options will expand. Marte could

take over at third if **Aaron Boone** again gets off to a slow start or force the Indians to ponder trades and other position changes. DH **Travis Hafner** is starting to look like he might be an option at first, but a midseason trade for an established left or right fielder appears the Indians' most likely move. ➤ It was early in the spring, but one scout was concerned by C **Mike Piazza**'s performance for Italy in the World Baseball Classic. "He had a blind spot on the outer part of the plate, taking too many strikes," the scout says. "He wasn't reading pitches well. He didn't have good plate coverage at all. Everything is slowing down just enough to where if he can't cheat (on the inside fastball), he's going to be in trouble." ➤ A scout who attended the first round of the WBC in Puerto Rico offers this assessment of Cuban 2B **Yuliesky Gourriel**, 21: "He has the tools and skills to become an All-Star-caliber player. He is far and away the best young guy here. He is playing second but has enough arm for third and short. Has good body life, lots of instincts and a feel for the game." The same scout says of watching the Cubans, "It is like going to a candy store, but you can't buy or touch." ➤ The Braves aren't going to trade RHP **John Thomson** unless they get back the right major league piece—a good reliever, perhaps, or a righthanded-hitting upgrade over **Matt Diaz** in the outfield or **James Jurries** at first base. Diaz and Jurries could be useful backups. Diaz had a 1.057 OPS with the Royals' Class AAA affiliate last season. Jurries hit 21 homers in 363 at-bats at Class AAA



Piazza

NAM Y. HUH / AP

The Astros have the right stuff to take a run at Zito.

With or without RHP **Roger Clemens**, the Astros could take a run at A's LHP **Barry Zito** if he becomes available this summer. A's G.M. **Billy Beane** has always liked IF/OF **Chris Burke**, and the Astros would have more young pitching to offer than the Mets, who could start their package with another Beane favorite, OF **Lastings Milledge**. The Astros would be in position to sign Zito, who can become a free agent after this season. The contracts of LHP **Andy Pettitte** and 1B **Jeff Bagwell** expire after this season.

with the Braves. ➤ News flash: A Cubs pitcher is healthy! RHP **Angel Guzman**, who pitched only 18½ innings in the minors last season after undergoing arthroscopic surgery on his pitching shoulder, is throwing 93 to 96 mph with improved command, "showing signs of the guy we all fell in love with," G.M. **Jim Hendry** says. Guzman, 25, could become a rotation option later in the season. ➤ OF **Elijah Dukes'** emergence this spring will make it easier for the Devil Rays to trade **Joey Gathright**. He isn't the Marlins' only target to fill their center field opening, but he might be the most realistic. The Marlins also have inquired about the Tigers' **Curtis Granderson**, the Astros' **Willy Taveras** and the Mariners' **Jeremy Reed**. Their leading internal candidate, the 5-11, 170-pound **Eric Reed**, does not appear to be the answer. "He looks like a fungo," a rival scout says.

Puckett's career can't be measured by stats alone

A friend of mine, a colleague I greatly respect, insists that we—the Baseball Writers' Association of America—blew it by electing Kirby Puckett to the Hall of Fame on the first ballot in 2001.

Over the years, I've grown to understand my friend's uneasiness about the projections of what might have been for Puckett if glaucoma hadn't prevented him from playing past age 35. But in the aftermath of Puckett's death, I feel once more—with conviction—that the BBWAA made the right call.

I was on the phone recently with a former Twin, and he explained to me that Puckett wasn't simply a great teammate but the *best* teammate. Always positive. Great with veterans. Great with youngsters. A true leader.

That's the Puckett who will be remembered, the Puckett who should be remembered, at least for those of us who knew him only as a baseball player. After he retired, it became evident that the man did not necessarily match the image of the player, as is so often the case with celebrities. But as a ballplayer, my goodness, Puckett was something to behold.

Puckett made 10 straight All-Star teams. Won six Gold Gloves in center field. Led the Twins to two improbable World Series titles.

If his career numbers were short, well, some players transcend cold, statistical analysis. Kirby Puckett was one.



TSN ARCHIVES

BLOG ALERT
Thank you, MLB, for giving me one more reason to love March.

Not feeling as favorably inclined toward baseball as Kathy Sheldon? Let her know at sportingnews.com.

BASEBALL



THE CLOSER Todd Jones

It was a world of fun for the South Africans

South Africa was by far the most overmatched team at the World Baseball Classic. But I guarantee no team had more fun or provided a better reason to play this tournament, which can't help but grow the sport in their country.

To start every bracket, there was a function to welcome every team to the host city and to break the ice for all the clubs and their officials. The dress was business casual. The U.S. guys showed up one at a time. You just made an appearance to show your face, then boom, you were out the door because you had a game the next day. Not South Africa. These guys showed up all together, in blue jeans and T-shirts. They were just hanging out.

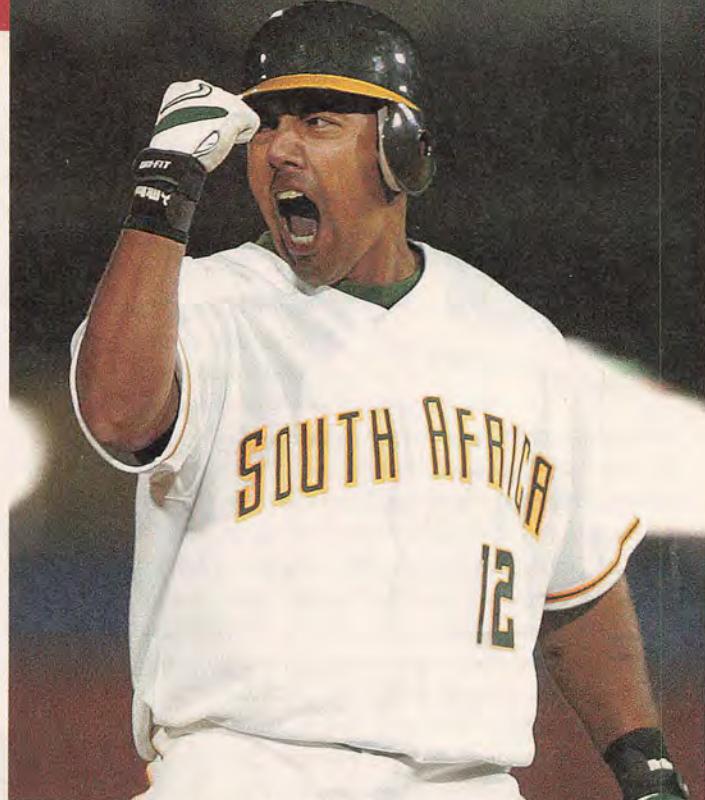
It was cool to see these young guys who were so happy to see in person the guys they had only watched on satellite. Every one of them had a camera. They took pictures of anybody who would

pose with them—Vinny Castilla, Esteban Loaiza, Roger Clemens, Jason Varitek.

They were so bright-eyed and just soaking it all up. These kids were only 17 to 25 years old. Yep, young guys. Guys barely out of high school were asked to compete with the best players in the world.

They were pretty good, too. Heck, South Africa had Canada on the ropes in the first game. South Africa was leading going into the ninth inning, and the poor guy threw the first pitch right back to the backstop. He was so nervous. Lee Smith was their pitching coach, but even the man with the most saves in major league history couldn't save that guy.

South Africa couldn't hold off Canada and got eliminated shortly after that. Clemens made those guys look like what they were: young kids facing a machine (and a pretty good machine at that).



ELAINE THOMPSON / AP

The South African players doubled as fans—and won a little respect.

South Africa had some good players—just not enough of them. But you could tell when you played them all they were looking for was a little respect. They battled every game. They hustled and played their tails off. If they had a good at-bat or got a good

hit, they considered it a small victory. They weren't concerned with the final score; they were into moral victories. They got plenty of those.

E-mail Todd Jones, a reliever for the Tigers, at tjones@sportingnews.com.

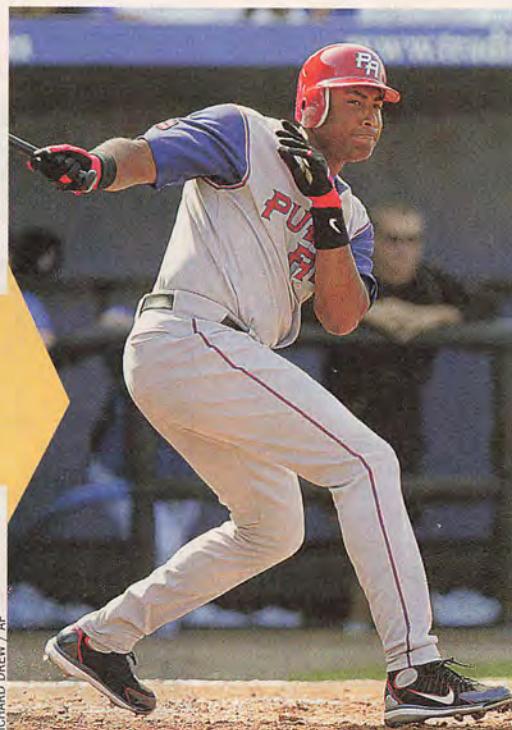
More to see in the WBC

Three to keep watching

Adam Loewen, LHP, Orioles. A 6-5 minor leaguer who pitched Canada to an 8-6 upset of Team USA, Loewen already is well-known among those in the game. He was the fourth pick in the 2002 draft, the highest a Canadian has been selected. The Orioles say Loewen, who will turn 22 next month, will pitch in the majors in 2007 even though he has struggled with his command and has yet to pitch above Class A. Against Team USA, he allowed six baserunners in 3 1/3 innings but did not give up a run.

Bernie Williams, DH/CF, Yankees. There still is life in the bat of this 37-year-old. In his first three games, Williams had a .333 average and four RBIs. He belted a home run in Puerto Rico's 12-2 rout of Cuba and had the winning hit in a 2-1 victory over Panama. Williams told reporters his home run was a career milestone. "I felt like I was playing the World Series in March."

Shairon Martis, RHP, Giants. If the 19-year-old does nothing else in his career, he forever will be in the record books for pitching the WBC's first no-hitter. He used every one of his allowed 65 pitches in beating Panama, 10-0, in a seven-inning, mercy-rule-shortened victory. Martis, from Curacao and pitching for the Netherlands, is expected to start at Class A this season after leading his rookie league team in strikeouts last season. Panama's lineup included two major leaguers.—Stan McNeal



RICHARD DREW / AP

TSNumbers

40 Runs allowed by China in its three pool games, the most in the first round and two more than South Africa gave up. Korea allowed the fewest: 3.

95 The pitch limit for a semifinal or championship game. Team USA relievers already were having trouble getting in enough game work when the limit was 65 in the first round. The limit was 80 in the second round.

467 RBIs racked up last season by the first four hitters in the Dominican Republic's opening game lineup. Alfonso Soriano had 104, Miguel Tejada 98, Albert Pujols 117 and David Ortiz 148.



HARAZ GHANBARI / AP

RHPs Esteban Yan, Kevin Gregg and Jason Bulger are vying for the **ANGELS'** final bullpen spot. Yan has worked to smooth a delivery that caused him to be too quick to the plate last season with runners on base. Gregg is the most versatile; he's the best candidate for spot starts. Bulger is a long shot, but the club likes his powerful arm. ... RHP Shawn Chacon has looked sharp while fighting for a spot in the **YANKEES'** rotation. Chacon says competing for a job with a contending team has helped him keep his focus. ... Acquiring Alex Cintron from the Diamondbacks gives the



JAY DROWNS / TSN

Getting out of Colorado has done wonders for Chacon's focus.

WHITE SOX a true backup to SS Juan Uribe. Having Cintron, a switch hitter, frees supersub Rob Mackowiak to play primarily in the outfield and back up Joe Crede at third and allows the club to rest OF Brian Anderson against tough righthanded pitchers. ... RHP Edwin Jackson, acquired from the Dodgers, is making a big splash in the **DEVIL RAYS'** camp as he tries to break into the rotation. He's trying to challenge hitters more with his fastball, a pitch in which he has renewed confidence. ... C John Flaherty retired, so Ken Huckaby and Josh Bard are battling to be **RED SOX** knuckleballer Tim Wakefield's personal catcher. Bard is underrated defensively but never has done much as a hitter. Huckaby

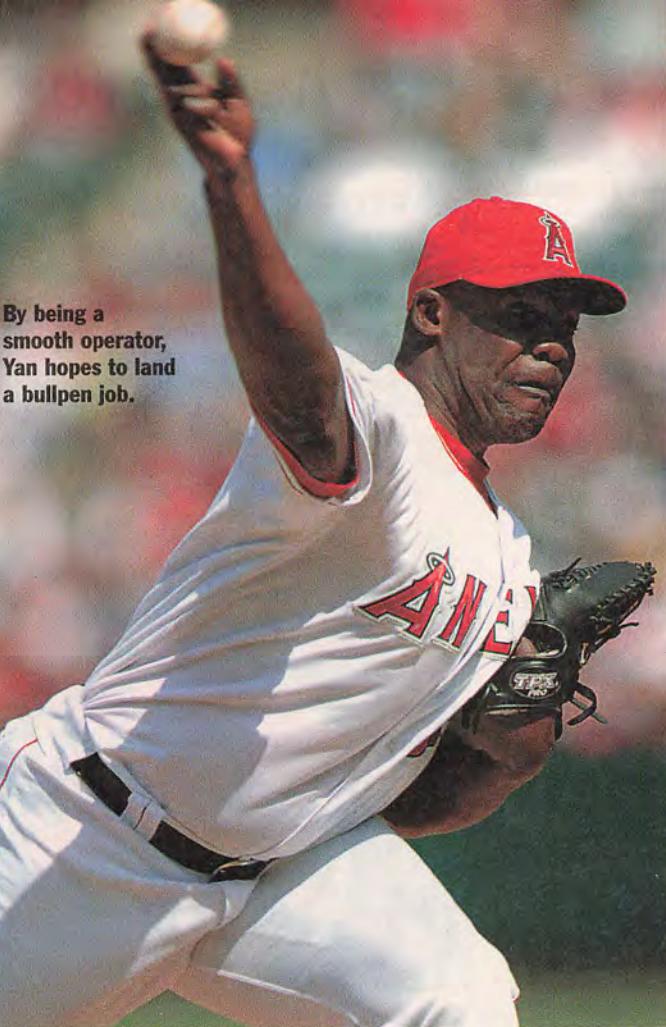
(knee) has missed a good portion of camp and will be forced to play catch-up. ... There were concerns **RANGERS**

1B/DH Phil Nevin was in decline last season, but he has started strong at the plate this spring, and his bat could help fill the hole created by **Alfonso Soriano's** departure. Nevin rededicated himself in the offseason, making two trips to Arlington to work with hitting coach Rudy Jaramillo. ... The **TWINS** are trying to add first base to switch hitter Ruben Sierra's list of jobs, which includes outfielder and designated hitter. The club would like to have a

righthanded hitter to back up lefthanded-hitting 1B Justin Morneau. ... **ORIOLES** prospect Nick Markakis has been the talk of early camp sessions and may be ready for a quick promotion to the majors. The team won't carry him as a part-time player. If he makes the roster, he'll likely start in left field and bat second. ... **ROYALS** RHP Leo Nunez has jumped back into

the bullpen picture with successful early outings. Nunez was a middle reliever last season, but opponents hit .329 against him. He got stronger in the offseason. ... The **MARINERS** are impressed by the emerging power potential of Mike Morse, who is learning to play in the outfield. Morse added 10 pounds of muscle this offseason and worked on his mobility. Partially because he's a righthanded hitter, Morse should land a roster spot. ...

INDIANS prospect Andy Marte has a strong arm and good range at third base, though he sometimes struggles to make backhand grabs. As a hitter, he tries to pull the ball too often. ... **TIGERS** OF Nook Logan is working on bunting. He's fast



By being a smooth operator, Yan hopes to land a bullpen job.

JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

Intentional grounding

Don't be surprised if Tigers RHP Roman Colon becomes more of a ground-ball pitcher. Pitching coach Chuck Hernandez has been working with Colon on raising his arm angle so he throws with more of a downward motion and keeps everything down in the strike zone.



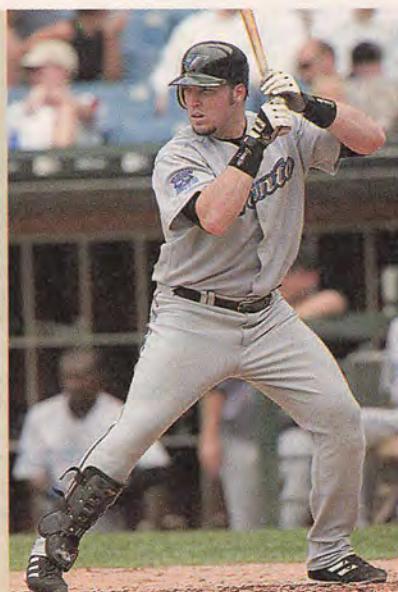
BOB LEVERONE / TSN

Keep an eye on ...

Alex Rios is playing in the World Baseball Classic, and the Blue Jays' Eric Hinske has taken advantage of extra playing time.

Hinske, a former corner infielder, is hitting well and has made a smooth transition to playing in the outfield. He'll compete with Rios for time in right. ... Red Sox RHP Manny

Delcarmen rediscovered his breaking ball early in camp, which boosts his chances to make the team. Delcarmen, whose fastball reaches the mid- to upper 90s, couldn't control his off-speed pitches during his major league call-up last season. ... RHP Andrew Brown has gotten better control of his blazing fastball, so his chances of joining the Indians' bullpen are good. Brown also is mixing in breaking balls more effectively.



JAY DROWNS / TSN

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Spencer Fordin; Boston, Ian Browne; Chicago, Scott Merkin; Cleveland, Anthony Castroviejo; Detroit, Jason Beck; Kansas City, Dick Kaegel; Los Angeles, Mike Scarr; Minnesota, Kelly Thiesier; New York, Mark Feinsand; Oakland, John Schlegel; Seattle, Doug Miller; Tampa Bay, Bill Chastain; Texas, T.R. Sullivan; Toronto, Jordan Bastian.

Dan Uggla's chances of winning the **MARLINS'** second base job increased when **Pokey Reese**'s contract was terminated. Uggla must improve defensively to secure the spot, but he is making strides. ... To prepare for his move to the rotation, **PHILLIES** RHP **Ryan Madson** is dusting off his curveball and focusing on establishing his fastball away and varying his pitch selection. ... **BRAVES**

RHP **John Smoltz** will try to pace himself this season, and he says that means he won't throw his split-finger fastball or slider as aggressively as in the past. He hopes a more controlled delivery will improve his mechanics and lessen the wear on his shoulder. ... Before CF **Carlos Beltran** left for the

World Baseball

Classic, his **METS** teammates said he appeared more relaxed than he did last season. They anticipate better production from Beltran because he won't be facing the exaggerated expectations he was met with after signing a huge contract last offseason. ... **NATIONALS** Of Alex

Escarob entered spring training as a sleeper candidate for a starting spot, but he has been held back by a sore right hip and quadriceps. He believes the injuries occurred after he put an orthotic device in his shoe to protect his right foot. ...

ASTROS RHP **Brandon Backe** had planned to put in equal time on each of his pitches in spring training. However, he wasn't pleased with his changeup—the key to his success—in his early appearances, so expect him to emphasize refining that pitch. ... **BREWERS** manager **Ned Yost** will stick with CF **Brady Clark** in the leadoff spot. Clark excels at getting on base, but he was only 10-for-23 on stolen base attempts in 2005. Clark is working on improving his footwork on jumps and is trying to steal whenever he gets a chance. ... **CARDINALS** RHP **Jason Marquis**

will use his changeup as the primary complement to his sinking fastball this season because he isn't as comfortable with his curveball, slider or cutter. Last year, he had no primary

Marquis plans to make his changeup his marquee off-speed pitch.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ FOR TSN



Keep an eye on ...

Braves RHP **Joey Devine** appears to be developing into the dominant reliever the team thought he could be when it drafted him in 2005. He will begin the season in middle relief, but he could win the closer role in the near future. ... Giants 2B **Derin McMains** has impressed the team with his power; he hit three home runs in his first four spring at-bats. A smooth fielder who can steal bases, McMains probably will start the season at Class AAA Fresno. ... Cardinals OF **John Gall** is slimmer and quicker and continues to improve defensively. He also is hitting with authority. If he keeps playing well, he could join the competition for the left field job.



Tracy wants the Pirates' hitters to be more selective. And if they aren't, he expects a hit. Anything else, coach?

AL BERNMAN / AP

complement. ... **CUBS** manager **Dusty Baker** would like to ease rookie SS **Ronny Cedeno** into the No. 2 spot in the lineup, but Cedeno is a perfect fit and no other good candidates are emerging. ... The

PIRATES are buying into new manager **Jim Tracy**'s philosophy of patience at the plate and drawing more walks. Tracy doesn't force his hitters to take strikes, but they are expected to make solid contact if they swing at a pitch early in a count. ...

REDS LHP **Eric Milton** is standing closer to the first base side of the rubber after working with guest instructor **Tom Browning**. The goal is to improve the angle of Milton's cut fastball to righthanded hitters. ...

DIAMONDBACKS 3B **Chad Tracy** has improved his throws to first because he has stopped looking at the runner before throwing. He developed that habit when he last played third base in 2004, and it contributed to many throwing errors. ...

ROCKIES C **Danny Ardoin** is concentrating on hitting fastballs and shortening his stroke. His natural strength gives him good opposite-field power, but he has had problems making contact in the past. ...

DODGERS RHP **Brad Penny** is primed for a breakout season, according to manager **Grady Little**. Penny worked harder than ever this offseason and says the arm injury that slowed him last season could have been prevented if he had worked as hard then as he is working now. ...

PADRES LHP **Shawn Estes** has shown no ill effects from the foot injury that cut short his 2005 season with Arizona. He is

throwing freely and with good command as he tries to secure a spot in the rotation. ... RHP **Brad Hennessey**, who is trying to win the final spot in the **GIANTS'** rotation, has been solid so far. He is getting ahead of hitters and escaping jams with minimal damage, things he struggled with last season.



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

Wood's knee isn't knocking

Cubs RHP **Kerry Wood**, who had arthroscopic surgery on his right knee last week and also is rehabbing his shoulder, isn't expected to be set back more than an additional two weeks—though the team won't say when he will be ready to pitch. He is focusing on improving his mechanics to avoid further injury.



CORRESPONDENTS:

Arizona, Steve Gilbert; Atlanta, Mark Bowman; Chicago, Carrie Muskat; Cincinnati, Mark Sheldon; Colorado, Thomas Harding; Florida, Joe Frisaro; Houston, Alyson Footer; Los Angeles, Ken Gurnick; Milwaukee, Adam McCalvy; New York, Marty Nobel; Philadelphia, Ken Mandel; Pittsburgh, Ed Eagle; San Diego, Lyle Spencer; San Francisco, Rich Draper; St. Louis, Matthew Leach; Washington, Bill Ladson.

NASCAR

INSIDER LEE SPENCER

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Simply surviving won't cut it. If a driver isn't willing to be up on the wheel, it won't be long until he's back at his local short track.

The real deal is knowing when to hold off



HAROLD HINSON FOR TSN

Earnhardt Jr. knows the best drivers think before they act, balancing on the razor's edge between aggressiveness and patience.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. calls it "the killer instinct." It's that innate take-no-prisoners attitude a driver must possess if he's going to make it at NASCAR's Nextel Cup level. But it must be controlled aggressiveness for a driver to flourish and be respected in the process. A driver can be a hard charger without making idiotic moves that compromise his and his competitors' finishes.

Dale Earnhardt Sr. was the master, and Junior was the perfect student. He idolized his teacher and observed every line, every zig, every zag on the racetrack and absorbed even more moves that are likely to hit him as "aha" moments when he least expects.

Psychologists would have a field day trying to determine whether it was nature or nurture that helped Driver 8 evolve into the star that he is. My deduction is it's a combination.

Junior knows what traits it takes to make a successful

racecar driver. He's not—and I repeat *not*—known for taking risks that put other drivers in harm's way. As an owner, he wants to project those same expectations onto his Busch Series driver, Mark McFarland. It's not a bad lesson for other 20-somethings, either.

Here's Junior's recipe for success: "You have to bring out that temper a little bit but still be able to control it at the same time. You've got to drive these cars with some rage. You can't always be strategic and pace yourself. There are times you have to get after it and show these guys who the boss is."

When Dale Sr. was on the racetrack, there was no doubt who the boss was. He feared no one. Junior has adopted the boss role at restrictor-plate tracks and has the ability to do so at short tracks, especially Bristol. His stock on intermediate tracks will improve with time.

Where Junior differs from his dad is his reluctance to win at any

cost. He won't risk dumping another driver to take home the trophy, and that has gotten him tremendous respect among his peers and the drivers who raced his father.

Many racers who competed during Earnhardt Sr.'s tenure have retired. The trend in Cup has moved toward youth, which has led to an increased level of aggressiveness on the racetrack. Many of the young drivers haven't had the seat time in the feeder series that would have helped them learn to be patient.

But that up-on-the-wheel exuberance sells tickets and attracts viewers. Fans don't want to watch racers out for a Sunday drive.

Yet as the transition between mature racers and young guns continues, NASCAR must find a way to restrain the recent over-the-top aggressiveness before someone gets seriously injured.

TSN



FACTS FROM RACING HISTORY.

1935:

Pushing his motorcycle to the limits, Lester Hillbush uses Valvoline to set a world stock motorcycle record at Langhorne Speedway. With no straightaways and made of dirt, this track came to be known as one of early racing's most dangerous.

speed reads

Richard Childress Racing might not have a say in Kevin Harvick's future. The only way for Harvick to escape Dale Earnhardt's ghost will be to leave the organization behind.

Now that Charlotte has been chosen as the site for the NASCAR Hall of Fame, the next question is who votes on the candidates. A well-balanced committee representing NASCAR, the competitors and the media would be best.

Kudos to FOX Sports for bringing the Cablecam back to NASCAR broadcasts. The best way to bring fans close to the action is by displaying every possible on-track camera angle.



TESTED ON THE TRACK.
TRUSTED ON THE ROAD.



INSIDE DISH

Are Hoosier tires returning to NASCAR? Goodyear has been the exclusive tire of NASCAR since 1997, but Hoosier tested a compatible tire at Kentucky Speedway last week. Don't be surprised if B.F. Goodrich or Michelin follows suit. ➤ **Matt Kenseth** will be among the drivers at an open test for the Car of Tomorrow at Bristol Motor Speedway on March 27, the day after the spring Bristol race. The teams have not had an opportunity to test the COT since January, and many have been reluctant to build cars until the final templates are determined. However, NASCAR research and development engineer **Brett Bodine** says the chassis dimensions and the floorboards are in place, adding that there's enough information available for teams to start building cars. A second short track test is planned for April 2 at Martinsville. NASCAR also will test May 15 at Darlington and May 30 at Lowe's Motor Speedway. The COT will make its competition debut at the Bristol spring race in 2007. ➤ Dale Earnhardt Inc. has been hard at work on its aero program with former crew chief **Tony Eury Sr.** leading the effort. To test its progress, **Paul Menard** will race a third DEI car this weekend at Atlanta. ➤ With the cutbacks in testing, how will rookies who lack road course experience get the necessary seat time before the Infineon race? Many will enroll



HAROLD HINSON FOR TSN

In three races, **Darian Grubb** has gone from unknown to crew chief sensation. Grubb, who has a degree in mechanical engineering from Virginia Tech, could go down in NASCAR annals as the crew chief with the highest winning percentage at the Cup level. As interim chief of **Jimmie Johnson**'s No. 48 in place of suspended **Chad Knaus**, Grubb has two wins (Daytona, Las Vegas) and a second (California) in three starts. Grubb, who is unfailingly humble, has been the team's engineer since its inception in 2001. That made the transition to chief easier. This weekend the crew enters Atlanta, where Johnson won in 2004 and finished second to **Carl Edwards** last spring. The Atlanta race is expected to be the crew chief swan song for Grubb, who's from Floyd, Va. He says he has no desire to continue as the team's leader. "There's no fame in this," says Grubb, 30. "We're here to race."

in the **Skip Barber** and **Jim Russell** driving schools. Others will test at Virginia International Raceway and Carolina Motorsports Park. Because there's not a Busch race at Infineon, expect the road course-challenged to enter the AutoZone West Series race and participate in its accompanying test in June.

TSN's POWER POLL

The top 10 Chevrolet drivers

- Jimmie Johnson** Best of the Chevys—and everybody else, for that matter.
- Tony Stewart** Defending champion is in position for a repeat run.
- Jeff Gordon** Rebuilding with a new crew chief on the box.
- Dale Earnhardt Jr.** Rebounding nicely after a miserable year.
- Jeff Burton** Has brought a wealth of knowledge to RCR.
- Denny Hamlin** Rookie flexing his muscle in equipment identical to the 20 car's.
- Kevin Harvick** Will Mr. Goodwrench drive Toyotas in 2007?
- Robby Gordon** Most underrated driver in the garage.
- Clint Bowyer** The Sopranos gave him an offer he couldn't refuse.
- Kyle Busch** Has tremendous potential but must calm down.

DOWN THE ROAD

presented by



Golden Corral 500 When: 1:30 p.m. ET Sunday

• TV: FOX • Length: 500.5 miles/325 laps



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OR THE GUYS WHO DRIVE THEM.**

The 2006 NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series is here. See for yourself why Team Tundra drivers get tougher with every race. toyota.com/NCTS

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 TOYOTA | moving forward ▶

INSIDER MATT STEINMETZ



Yao Ming has looked like the best center in the NBA in recent weeks—now is his chance to prove it.

Who's better than Shaq? Yao—and how

Now is as good a time as any.

It's time to call the Rockets' Yao Ming what he is: the best center in the NBA.

Yes, there's that small matter of the big fella in Miami, but the reality is that the gradual upward arc of Yao has intersected the inevitable downward arc of Shaquille O'Neal.

That's nothing against Shaq. It's just that Father Time doesn't lose matchups.

O'Neal still is the most dominant player in the NBA ... at times. But Yao has O'Neal beat when it comes to production game in and game out.

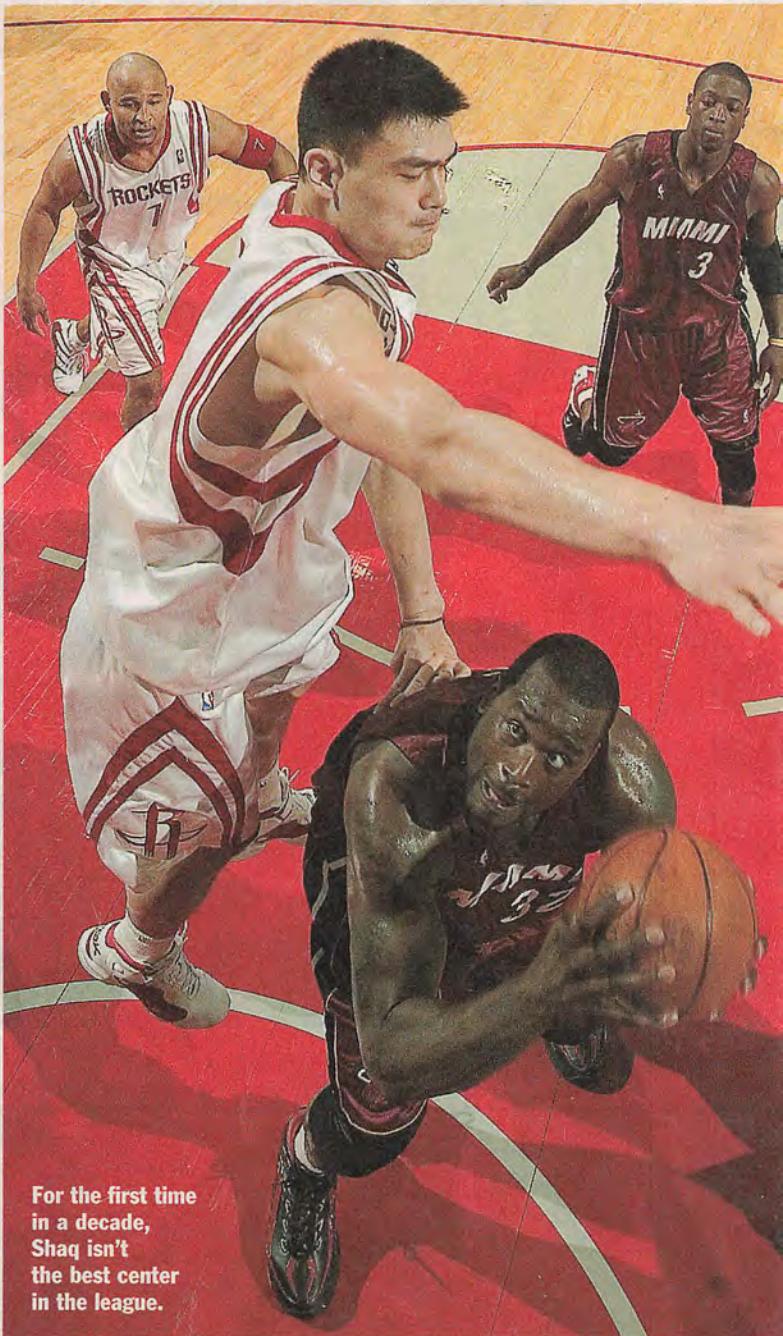
Forget for a moment that the scoring and rebounding stats have swung in Yao's favor. The most pertinent numbers are 34 and 25. O'Neal is 34, and the cold, hard fact is he's getting worse, not better. Yao is 25 and by almost any objective measure has yet to reach his prime. In four of the past five seasons, including this one, O'Neal has missed at least 15 games. Yao had been an iron man for three-plus seasons

before a toe injury sidelined him for six weeks in December and January.

But since his return, Yao has been relentlessly good, with the lone exception a 6-point blip on the radar against the Suns. O'Neal, to his credit, has been doing his thing since returning from an ankle injury in mid-December. But his big games aren't quite as big as they used to be, and they're coming a little more infrequently.

Then, of course, there's foul shooting. Popular opinion suggests O'Neal hits his foul shots when they matter. Perhaps, but O'Neal has shot less than 50 percent from the line in each of the past two playoff series his teams have lost.

Yao, who is hitting 83.2 percent from the line this season, is Houston's best free throw shooter and is shooting more free throws now that he has become a bigger part of the offense. Yao no longer is willing to go long stretches without being a factor. His selflessness, frequently cited by critics as a significant shortcoming, is diminishing. He asserts himself



For the first time in a decade, Shaq isn't the best center in the league.

The NBA's top five centers

1 Yao Ming, Rockets. The combination of Yao's sheer size (7-6) and soft touch around the basket will make him one of the league's most difficult guys to guard in coming years. His defense is improving, and he's beginning to emerge as a team leader. Perhaps more important, he's developing a bit of a nasty streak.

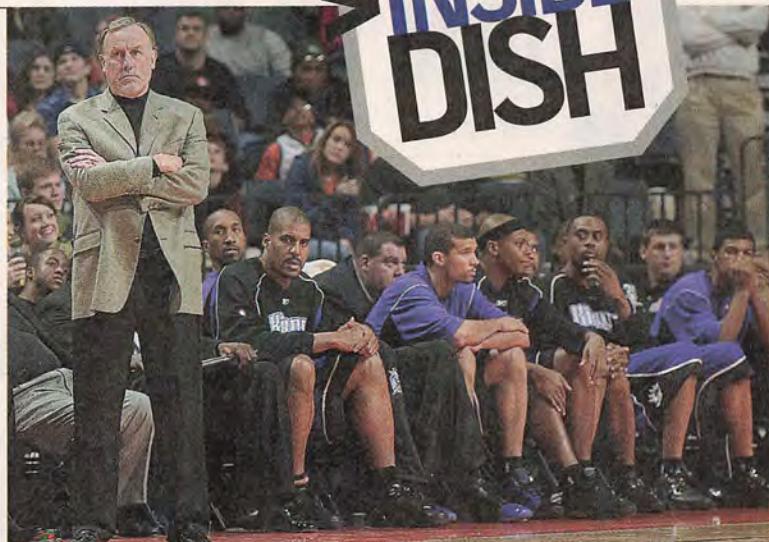
2 Shaquille O'Neal, Heat. When motivated and healthy, O'Neal remains the toughest matchup in the NBA. But he no longer can be dominant for long stretches. It will be interesting to see how he holds up in the playoffs.

3 Ben Wallace, Pistons. He is the most valuable nonscorer in the NBA because he brings a defensive intensity that fuels the Pistons. Wallace rarely needs defensive help and is one of the best team defenders in the league.

4 Marcus Camby, Nuggets. When healthy, Camby may be the most versatile center in the game, capable of scoring both inside and out as well as defending a variety of interior players.

5 Brad Miller, Kings. He can knock down 18- to 20-footers and sees passing angles other big men only wish they could. If he could defend even a little bit, he'd be higher on this list.

INSIDE DISH



Adelman is pulling an old **K.C. Jones** trick and playing his starters big minutes. In a recent win over the Grizzlies, Adelman used just seven players, with PG **Mike Bibby**, SF **Ron Artest** and SG **Kevin Martin** logging at least 40 minutes each. ➤ Don't expect the Lakers to fall out of the Western Conference playoff race. But the same can't be said for the Hornets. The Lakers, currently sitting in seventh place in the West, finish

BOB LEVERONE / TSN

If Adelman has to run his guys into the ground to get to the playoffs, he'll do it.

Warriors vice president **Chris Mullin** recently said the most disappointing aspect of his team's season was "losing close games." He made that statement one day after the Warriors led the Jazz by six points with 5 minutes remaining, then gave up a game-tying 3-pointer to SF **Matt Harpring** with a second left in regulation and lost in overtime. In three of the Warriors' ensuing defeats, they lost games in which they were tied with 4:20 remaining (Timberwolves), down by one with 8 minutes left (Hawks) and up by four with 3:20 remaining (Bobcats). Golden State is 0-6 in games decided by 3 or fewer points since January 1. ➤ Mavericks coach **Avery Johnson** might be setting an unattainable standard in Dallas. After the Mavericks defeated the Blazers last week, Johnson complained he wasn't getting through to his players and that "what we're doing isn't working." Johnson, whose career record as Mavs coach was 65-15 entering the week, has Dallas competing with the Spurs for the best record in the Western Conference. ➤ Everyone knows Mavericks owner **Mark Cuban** takes an active role in his franchise, but he's not the only owner who speaks up. In the past couple of weeks, the Jazz's **Larry Miller** and the Bucks' **Herb Kohl** have ripped into their teams about effort and commitment. ➤ Keep an eye on how the Kings handle their stretch drive. Coach **Rick**

the season with 10 of their last 13 games at home, including their final five. The Hornets play the majority of their remaining games on the road and conclude their season with three straight away from home. ➤ The rebuilding Magic is considering whether to shut down SF **Grant Hill** (sports hernia) for the rest of the season. Despite Hill's playing in only 21 games this year, management still insists he is in the team's plans for 2006-07, the last year of his deal. ➤ 76ers coach **Maurice Cheeks** recently had a rough two-game stretch with PF **Chris Webber**. Cheeks left Webber on the bench for the entire fourth quarter of a 104-101 loss to the Celtics last week, a game in which Boston rallied from seven points down with 2:20 remaining. The next night, Cheeks had Webber on the floor almost the entire fourth quarter against the Nuggets, but Webber missed all three of his field-goal attempts and went just 3-of-6 from the line as the 76ers blew another late lead. ➤ 76ers C **Samuel Dalembert** is unhappy Cheeks hasn't made him a starter since he returned from an ankle injury two weeks ago. Cheeks says Dalembert will re-enter the starting lineup when he becomes more consistent.

speed reads

Suns managing partner Robert Sarver has been criticized for allowing president and general manager Bryan Colangelo to leave for Toronto. But coach Mike D'Antoni, recently promoted to vice president and G.M. to replace Colangelo, has been in on all of the Suns' decision making in recent years—and comes a little cheaper than Colangelo.



Expect the **Kevin Garnett** watch to begin anew after the season. A frustrated Garnett tore into the Timberwolves after a loss to the Suns last week, saying the locker room was "like we won."

Even the best G.M.s aren't perfect: Brian Cardinal, whom the Grizzlies' Jerry West signed to a six-year, \$37 million contract two years ago, plays sparingly (when healthy) and is averaging only 3.5 points.

these days, and his teammates are giving him the basketball whenever he demands it.

In his first nine games after the All-Star break, Yao's numbers were jaw-dropping: 27.8 points, 13.7 rebounds and 2.3 blocks per game. What's more, the Rockets were 7-2 in those games and Tracy McGrady wasn't around for a couple of them.

It's no wonder that even reluctant praiser Jeff Van Gundy calls Yao the "best regular-season center in the NBA." That obvious qualifier no doubt is in deference to O'Neal, who, unlike Yao, has done big things in the playoffs. Yao's playoff resume is skimpy when compared with O'Neal's.

That the Rockets are even talking playoffs, though, is largely because of Yao. Houston will head toward the homestretch without McGrady, who might miss the remainder of the regular season because of a back injury. So it's on Yao to guide what has become a severely undermanned squad to eighth place in the Western Conference standings.

That's a big-time challenge—the kind O'Neal, in his prime, likely would have been up for. And the kind Yao, in just his fourth season, seems ready to handle.

TSN

ROBERT SEALE / TSN

BLOG ALERT

The Bulls are a classic example of a team that needs fluid coaching, not a set rotation.

TSN's Sean Devaney diagnoses what's wrong with the Bulls. What's ailing your favorite team? Let us know at sportingnews.com.

INSIDER DAN POMPEI

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Choosing between Mario Williams and A.J. Hawk may be the most interesting call in the draft.

The Packers can't go wrong, right?

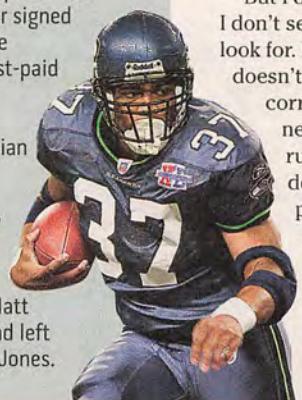
speedreads

Thank heaven the collective bargaining agreement has been extended. Thank the owners. And thank Paul Tagliabue. But especially thank NFLPA boss Gene Upshaw. Nobody was more responsible for a deal getting done than Upshaw, and he secured a fantastic deal for the players.

The best part about labor peace: We don't have to deal with ugly negotiations anymore. Labor talks get old fast.

The top of this year's draft is markedly better than the top of last year's draft. In fact, if Alex Smith had come out this year, the No. 1 overall pick in 2005 probably would not have been selected until late in the first round. It's a slam dunk that Matt Leinart, Vince Young and Jay Cutler would have gone ahead of Smith.

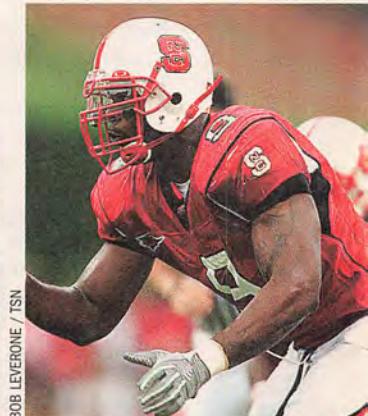
The Seahawks were smart to sign running back **Shaun Alexander**—but only because it was at their price. The deal Alexander signed makes him the second-highest-paid running back behind San Diego's LaDainian Tomlinson. He's third on the Seahawks' payroll, behind quarterback Matt Hasselbeck and left tackle Walter Jones.



I am Ted Thompson.
I am tortured.
I have the fifth pick in the draft.
I need a defensive end.
I need a linebacker.
Mario Williams or A.J. Hawk?
A.J. Hawk or Mario Williams?
I can't go wrong.
But how can I go most right?

I dim the lights and turn on the N.C. State tape of Williams for the 200th time.
I am awed. I see a beast who swats away 320-pound blockers as if they were flies. He can pass rush through offensive tackles or go around them. I see a huge, explosive end who will pose matchup problems for many offensive tackles. I see a powerful tackler—a player who can shed a blocker and make a play against the run. I see rare athleticism for a guy who is 6-7, 295. I see a bigger Julius Peppers.

But I don't like everything I see. I don't see the kind of instincts I look for. I see a lineman who doesn't always read the play correctly. I see a player who needs to develop an inside rush and learn to split double-teams. I see a player who doesn't go the same speed on every down. I see a player who performed unevenly last year and subsequently was pulled from the starting lineup for a game.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

The Packers need to weigh the value of the positions before deciding between Hawk (left) and Williams.

But back to Williams for a moment. Ultimately, I see a player so gifted that no flaws should dissuade me. I see a freak who plays a critical position. Super Mario is what I see.

I should write his name on the card now.

But I owe it to myself to look at Hawk again, so I pop in the Ohio State tape.

I see a player who is all over the field. I see someone athletic enough, fast enough and stout enough to play any linebacker position. I see a linebacker who has an uncanny feel for the game, who almost always reads plays as if he had designed them for the offense. I see a defender who can take on offensive linemen and disengage about as well as anyone I can remember—and then make tackles surely and violently.

I see a blitzer who is so skilled, he had only five fewer sacks than Williams put up last season. I see a linebacker who can make plays from hot dog vendor to beer stand. I see an intimidator, a leader. I see a player who is as

I see the physique of an alien and 14½ sacks last season, but I also see a player who, according to a vote by the Atlantic Coast Sports Media Association, was the fourth-best defender in the ACC. Williams received four votes for defensive player of the year, compared with 31 for Maryland linebacker D'Qwell Jackson, 17 for Boston College end Mathias Kiwanuka and 14 for Virginia Tech end Darryl Tapp.

I see quite a contrast in Hawk. He led Ohio State three seasons in tackles, was named an All-American and the team MVP twice and, as a senior, won the Big Ten defensive player of the year award and the Lombardi Trophy.

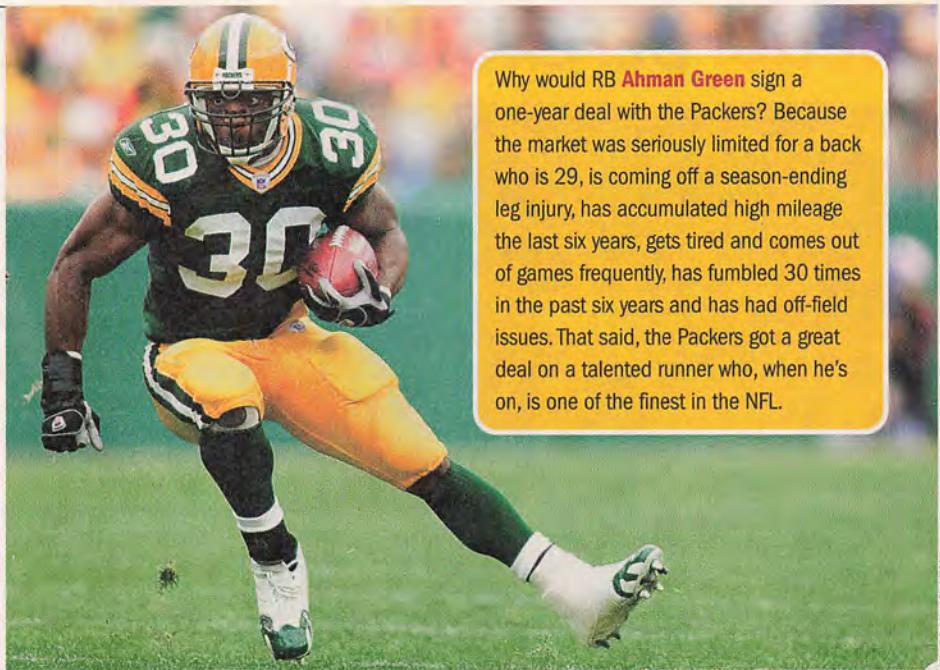
INSIDE DISH

To replace OLB Willi

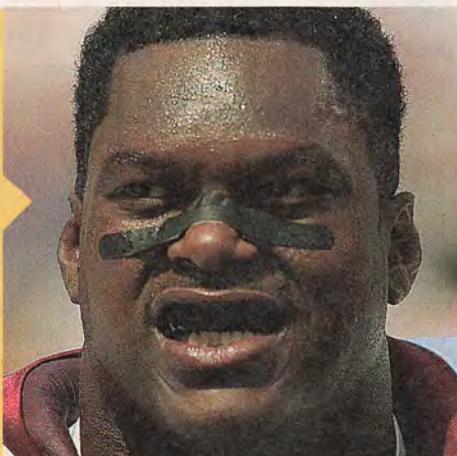
Witherspoon, the Panthers are likely to move 2005 first-round pick **Thomas Davis** from safety to linebacker. Davis started out in training camp as a safety, then moved to linebacker after **Brandon Short** was injured. Davis struggled at linebacker and subsequently was moved back to safety. But most of his playing time came as a nickel linebacker in the Panthers' 30 package. Davis showed the ability to blitz and drop in the special defense, but it's uncertain whether the former college safety is ready to become a starter at linebacker. ➤ The Ravens hope LT **Jonathan Ogden**

rededicates himself in the offseason. Ogden, who will be 32 in July, started to show signs of age last season but still is one of the NFL's elite blockers. Specifically, the team hopes he will hit the weights harder after the wakeup

LB LaVar Arrington is an intriguing free agent for a number of teams. The former Redskin can run and hit with the best of them. But he's limited in terms of coverage, and he doesn't play fast when he's not running in a straight line. Some will be scared off because Redskins assistant head coach/defense **Gregg Williams**—along with four other defensive coordinators Arrington played for in Washington—failed to get the most out of him. The Redskins' coaches still believe he can be special if he really wants to be.



Why would RB **Ahman Green** sign a one-year deal with the Packers? Because the market was seriously limited for a back who is 29, is coming off a season-ending leg injury, has accumulated high mileage the last six years, gets tired and comes out of games frequently, has fumbled 30 times in the past six years and has had off-field issues. That said, the Packers got a great deal on a talented runner who, when he's on, is one of the finest in the NFL.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

call he received in 2005. Last offseason, Ogden got married and became a father, so he had more going on than usual. The Ravens wouldn't be surprised to see Ogden play better in 2006. ➤ A lot of middle linebackers are among

the slowest players on their defenses but not Bears MLB **Brian Urlacher**. The in-house estimate is Urlacher was the Bears' fourth-fastest defensive player last season, slower only than CBs **Jerry Azumah** and **Charles Tillman** and S **Mike Brown**. Urlacher and Pro Bowl CB **Nathan Vasher** are thought to have about the same speed. ➤ Releasing OT **Mike Williams**, a 2002 first-round pick, was a lot easier for the Bills because of the way RT **Jason Peters** improved last season. A former college tight end, Peters took advantage of injuries to starters and showed what he could do. The Bills think he will be outstanding if he continues to apply himself. In addition to having excellent feet, Peters gets movement in the running game.

safe a pick as any in the draft—and a finished product.

I see greatness. I don't think there is any doubt Hawk is the better player. It's the values of the positions that hang me up.

I know I should adhere to the old tried-and-true philosophies: *You win games with your lines; the player who is closest to the ball is most valuable; you can't find special pass rushers; a great end creates opportunities for everyone else on defense.* I know 90 percent of the teams probably would draft Williams.

I ask myself this question: *Is it easier to neutralize a great end or*

a great middle linebacker? You can double-team a great end and control him most of the time if you are determined to do so. It's more difficult to account for a linebacker in the middle of the field.

I figure you can create a pass rush. The Steelers and Seahawks are proof of that. You can't create a physical force in the middle of the field who gives your defense identity.

I think about the great inside linebackers. Dick Butkus. Jack Lambert. Ray Nitschke. Ray Lewis. Mike Singletary. Bill George. Joe Schmidt. Sam Huff.

Nick Buoniconti. Harry Carson. What do they have in common? Well, with the exception of Butkus, they've all won championships. It seems like great middle linebackers have that effect on teams.

I make up my mind. Hawk is my guy.

With the fifth pick in the draft, the Green Bay Packers select A.J. Hawk, linebacker, Ohio State.

I wake up.
I have been dreaming.
I am no longer Ted Thompson.
Never was.
Of course. Taking A.J. Hawk, it's a dream.

BLOG ALERT

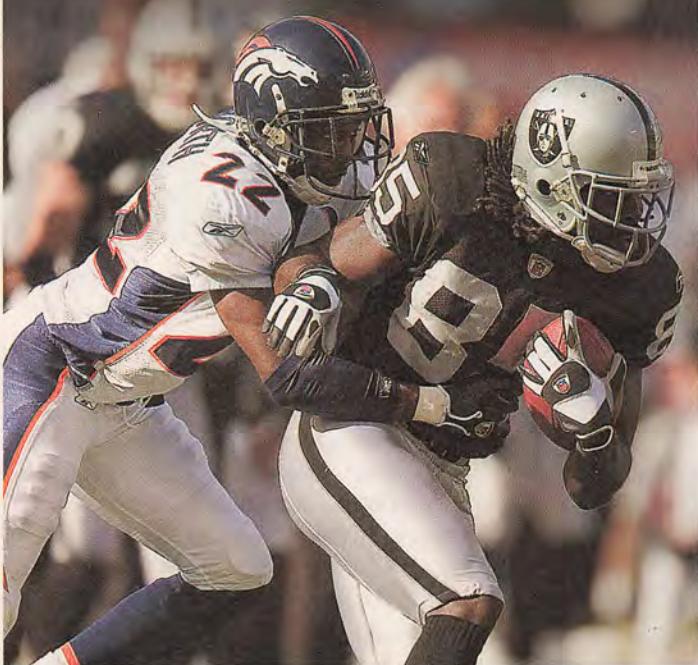
I didn't sign up to be a sportswriter so I could ask lawyers about bargaining negotiations.

Now that Dan Pompei has stopped laboring over CBA issues, he's amped up to write about free-agent moves and the draft. He'll grant you due process, so let him hear your case at sportingnews.com.

FOCUS: DEFENSIVE ADJUSTMENTS

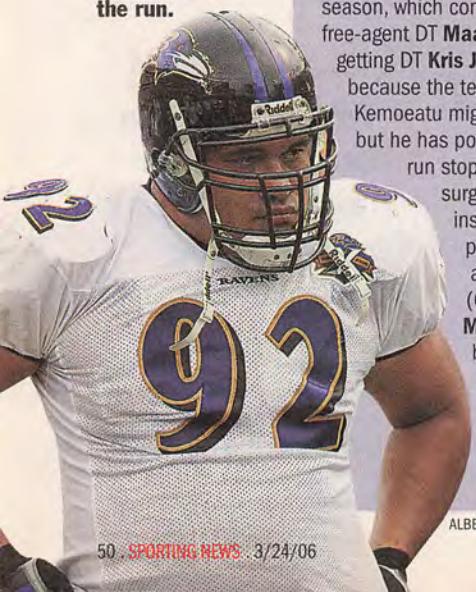
The Broncos know it's all about adjusting

The Broncos have to improve their third-down defense, something the loss to Pittsburgh in the AFC championship game reinforced. Offenses used maximum protection packages and threw the ball quickly to take advantage of soft coverage by Denver's cornerbacks. The team likely will allow second-year CBs **Darrent Williams** and **Domonique Foxworth** to play receivers more tightly in 2006, which the Broncos hope will lead to more interceptions. As usual, the team will study the top five defenses from 2005 and make changes based on what it learns.



ROBERT SEALE / TSN

With Kemoeatu's bulk on board, the Panthers will be more stout against the run.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

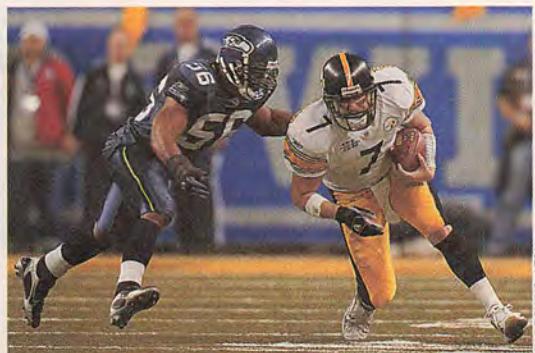
The Panthers add pounds to stop the pounding

The Panthers' run defense was inconsistent last season, which contributed to several losses. Adding free-agent DT **Maake Kemoeatu** (6-5, 350) and getting DT **Kris Jenkins** (6-4, 335) back will help because the team will have lots of size inside. Kemoeatu might not be worth his big contract, but he has potential and likely will be a solid run stopper. Jenkins is coming off knee surgery, so Kemoeatu provides insurance if Jenkins has lingering problems. Kemoeatu's signing also allows DTs **Jordan Carstens** (6-5, 300) and **Kindal Moorehead** (6-2, 285) to assume backup roles, which suit them better. Improved play from the tackles would keep blockers off MLB **Dan Morgan** and give him room to make plays.

The Jaguars are billing free-agent signee **Brian Williams** (Vikings) as a potential shutdown cornerback, which could result in a philosophical shift on defense this fall. The club already has a left corner with star potential in **Rashean Mathis**, so if Williams lives up to coach **Jack Del Rio**'s praise, the Jaguars could play a lot more man coverage and bring the blitz more frequently. ... As the Vikings switch to a Tampa 2 scheme, the biggest change will be in coverage. The linebackers will have greater responsibilities in their particular zones. Coordinator **Mike Tomlin** plans to have players work at multiple positions during spring practices and perhaps even training camp so they'll have a big-picture view of the new scheme. The new defense almost certainly will feature new starters at two linebacker positions. The team also needs to replace SS **Corey Chavous**, who signed with the Rams. ...

Expect Seahawks coaches to find more ways to send LBs **Lofa Tatupu** and **Leroy Hill** after the quarterback next season. Both are effective blitzers. ... The Colts will explore the possibility of moving **Marlin Jackson** from cornerback to safety during offseason work. Jackson, who was effective covering slot receivers in the nickel package last season, would bring good size (6-0, 196) and cover skills to a safety role. Current starting Ss **Bob Sanders** and **Mike Doss** are fierce hitters, but neither excels in coverage. ... **Will Witherspoon** made his reputation as a weakside linebacker in Carolina, but the Rams plan to use the free-agent pickup at middle linebacker. Although Witherspoon (6-1, 231) is undersized for the position, the team feels its retooled schemes

up front will keep blockers off Witherspoon. He'll be on the field all the time, which will help the run defense in nickel situations because he's a sure tackler. ... Look for the Raiders to use a far more conventional system than what they employed last season, when injuries and ineffectiveness compelled coordinator **Rob Ryan** to lean heavily on a scheme that featured five defensive backs and CB **Charles Woodson** in a safetylike role against bigger receivers. ... The Saints decided against switching to a 3-4 scheme because of the strength of their ends, but some elements of the 3-4 could be folded into the defense. Coordinator **Gary Gibbs** and assistant head coach **Joe Vitt** both are linebackers coaches by trade, and the team is expected to overhaul the position this offseason. The linebacking unit needs to become much more physical and effective up the middle against the run.



JAY DROWNS / TSN

Quarterbacks beware: Hill will be coming at you even more frequently next season.

Safeties must play like Lions

Not surprisingly, Lions coach **Rod Marinelli** will use cover 2—the system used by Tampa Bay during his years there—as the main scheme. That means the line will use mostly a one-gap technique and only four players will rush most of the time. But with the speed Detroit has at linebacker, look for more zone blitzes than typically used in a cover 2 scheme. In addition, a safety often will be brought into the box. For the defense to operate at a high level, the free safety must be able to be productive near the line.



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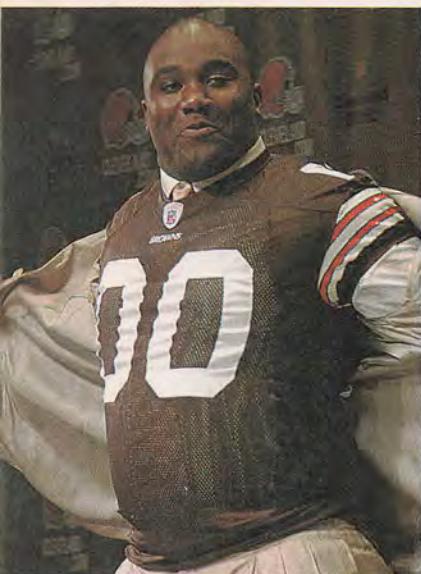
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NFL INSIDE THE AFC



MOLLY CORMAN / AP

Busy, busy Browns

The Browns made a big splash in the free-agent market by signing G/C **LeCharles Bentley**, WR **Joe Jurevicius** and NT **Ted Washington**. Bentley gives the team the elite interior blocker it needed to upgrade a lackluster line. He fits best at left guard, with **Jeff Faine** remaining the starting center. Jurevicius' size (6-5, 230) will help in the red zone, and he will provide needed leadership for the receiving unit. Washington's ability to command double-teams will make the team's 3-4 defense more effective. Former Falcon **Kevin Shaffer** was signed to fill a hole at left tackle. This move is more of a gamble, though the team believes Shaffer has answered concerns that he plays too high and takes poor angles to blocks.

The **BILLS** signed DT **Larry Tripplett** (Colts) because his quickness makes him a good fit in the team's new one-gap defensive scheme, but they still need to add a run-stuffing tackle. WR **Andre' Davis** (Patriots) bolsters the team's depth, and his size (6-1, 195) and speed make him a vertical threat—if he can stay healthy. ... Signing DE **Trevor Pryce** (Broncos) became a priority for the **RAVENS** after the team lost DT **Maake Kemoeatu** and DE **Anthony Weaver**, but many around the league think Pryce is declining. At this point, he is not a player to build around. ... The **TITANS** would like DT **Albert Haynesworth** (6-6, 320) to start camp around 315 pounds. When he keeps his weight under control, Haynesworth is

difficult to block and less likely to get injured. ... New **CHARGERS** S **Marlon McCree** (Panthers) probably will supplant FS **Bhawoh Jue**. McCree (5-11, 205) is always around the ball, and he can make plays on the ball, something the team's secondary has struggled to do. Jue could move to the strong side or a reserve role. ... The **TEXANS** signed Weaver (Ravens) to start at right end and add a veteran presence. He is a dependable player but won't make many big plays. Jason Babineaux will switch sides and compete with **Antwan Peek** to be the starting left end. ... The **JAGUARS** probably made an upgrade by signing CB **Brian Williams** (Vikings) but probably overpaid, too. Williams is quick and can make plays, but there wasn't a lot

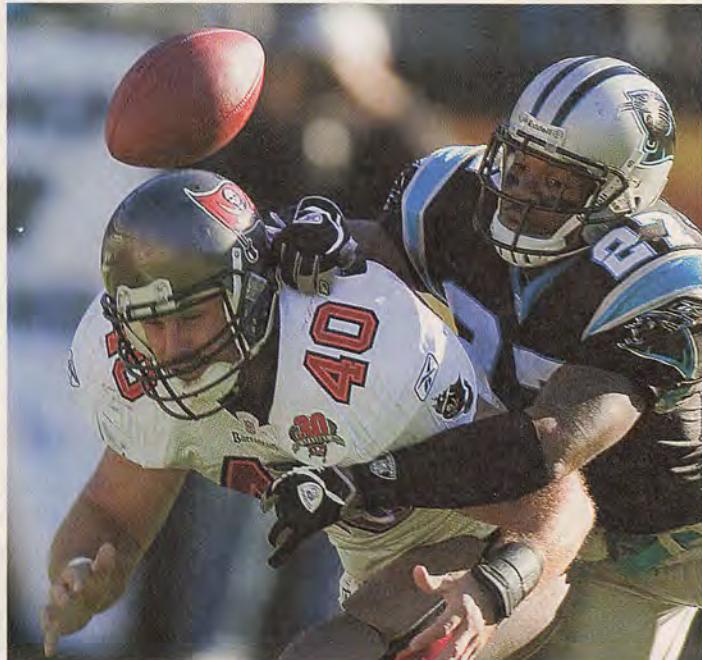
of market interest in him. ... The **BRONCOS** think DE **Corey Jackson** (6-8, 265) is ready to make an impact. Jackson has playmaking ability but is inexperienced. The team has several effective veteran ends, so he'll have to earn a spot in the rotation. ...

STEELERS CB **Ike Taylor** was effective in "shadow" coverage—covering the same receiver no matter where he lines up—in games against WRs **Chad Johnson**, **Muhsin Muhammad** and **Koren Robinson** last season, but don't expect the Steelers to use him frequently in that role in 2006. Coordinator **Dick LeBeau** prefers to mix his coverages. ... After cutting QB **Kerry Collins**, the **RAIDERS** are in the market for one or two quarterbacks. The team isn't sold on backup **Marques Tuiasosopo**; he also could be cut. Second-year player **Andrew Walter** has plenty to learn before he can be counted on for substantial playing time. ... **BENGALS** FB **Jeremi Johnson** (5-11, 265) has an excellent combination of size, strength and versatility, and he is agile enough to put bruising hits on linebackers. Johnson needs to improve his pass protection, technique and consistency. ... The

DOLPHINS want to upgrade the speed at receiver to force defenses to drop back. If opponents aren't able to crowd the line, the Dolphins can better exploit the threat of RB **Ronnie Brown**. Expect them to sign a free-agent wideout. ... SLB **Gilbert Gardner** will replace **David Thornton**, the latest **COLTS** linebacker to leave as a free agent. Gardner (6-1, 228) has adequate size and athleticism, but he is inexperienced—he has only 42 tackles in 22 games. ... The **JETS** might replace departed Pro Bowl C **Kevin Mawae** with **Norm Katnik**, who was signed off the 49ers' practice squad last November. Katnik (6-4, 300) is undersized, but he is intelligent and technically proficient. ...

CHIEFS CB **Julian Battle** will get a long look from new coach **Herm Edwards** after missing last season with a torn Achilles' tendon. Battle has good size (6-2, 205) and athletic ability, but he uses his hands too much in coverage and doesn't trust his athleticism. Battle could earn playing time if he is healthy and breaks his bad habits. ... The **PATRIOTS** have only two receivers—**Deion Branch** and **Bethel Johnson**—under contract and need to address the position in the free-agent market. The offense has a steep learning curve, something the team must consider when identifying targets.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Bart Hubbuch; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jason Cole; New England, Tom Curran; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

The Chargers added McCree because of his ability to make plays on the ball—a skill their secondary had been lacking.

OFFSEASON CONDITIONING PROGRAMS

Team	Starting date
Baltimore	March 20
Buffalo	March 20
Cincinnati	April 3
Cleveland	April 3
Denver	April 3
Houston	March 20
Indianapolis	April 3
Jacksonville	April 17
Kansas City	March 27
Miami	March 20
New England	March 27
N.Y. Jets	March 20
Oakland	March 27
Pittsburgh	April 17
San Diego	March 20
Tennessee	March 20

The Dolphins have several offensive linemen—most notably RT **Vernon Carey** and G/C **Rex Hadnot**—who need to add strength and get in better shape.

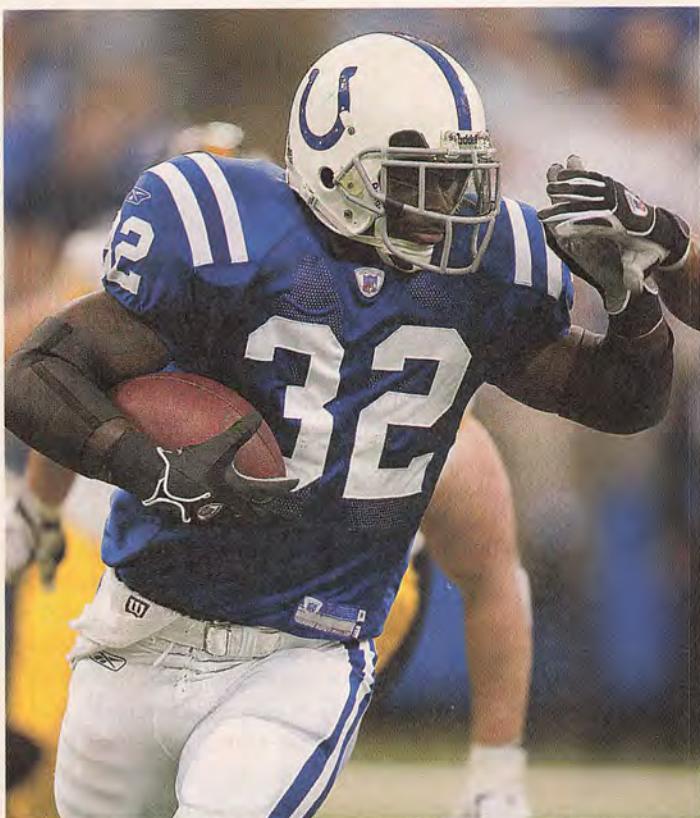
The Raiders have to focus on acclimating to a new coaching staff. It will be even more important because coach Art Shell and offensive coordinator Tom Walsh weren't hired until well after the Super Bowl, and it has been a long time since either was an NFL coach.

The Titans were forced to play several rookies last season, and they had to learn on the run. The offseason will focus on refining the techniques of those players.



JOHN CORDES FOR TSN

INSIDE THE NFC



With James in the fold, Arizona's running game will be a whole lot edgier.

A pair of free-agent pickups could fix the **CARDINALS'** running woes. **Edgerrin James** (Colts) gives the team an elite running back in the prime of his career. **Milford Brown** (Texans) is projected to start at right guard and has the ability to move large defensive tackles, something the line struggled to do last season. ... The additions of **Antwaan Randle El** (Steelers) and **Brandon Lloyd** (49ers) give the **REDSKINS** a potent three-wideout package. Randle El is the presumed No. 2 receiver; he has excellent speed and also fills a need for an accomplished punt returner. Lloyd (6-0, 192) is a solid player with decent size, speed and playmaking ability. Their presence will give No. 1 WR **Santana Moss** more opportunities to make plays downfield. ... The **PANTHERS** upgraded at center by signing **Justin Hartwig** (Titans), who is technically sound and smart enough to make all the line calls. His presence likely will speed up the development of RG **Evan Mathis**. ... Free-agent pickup **Marquand Manuel** (Seahawks) is an in-the-box player who will toughen up the **PACKERS'** run defense, but his coverage skills are suspect. He's the probable starter at strong safety and likely will be able to effectively direct the secondary. ... **RAMS** signee **Corey Chavous** (Vikings) likely will be better in coverage and a more sure tackler at strong safety than **Adam Archuleta**, though Chavous won't pack the same punch in the

box against the run. Another addition, DT **La'Roi Glover** (Cowboys), will satisfy coordinator **Jim Haslett**'s desire for an inside pass-rushing threat. ... CB **Sam Madison** (Dolphins), signed by the **GIANTS** to start opposite CB **Corey Webster**, isn't as fast as he used to be, but he knows how to intercept passes.

OFFSEASON CONDITIONING PROGRAMS

Team	Starting date
Arizona	April 3
Atlanta	March 20
Carolina	March 30
Chicago	April 10
Dallas	March 20
Detroit	March 20
Green Bay	March 20
Minnesota	March 20
New Orleans	March 20
N.Y. Giants	March 20
Philadelphia	March 20
St. Louis	March 20
San Francisco	March 20
Seattle	April 3
Tampa Bay	March 20
Washington	March 20

The Cowboys want to be physical at the point of attack and control defenses with their running game, but they can't do that unless linemen such as Al Johnson, Marco Rivera and Rob Petitti gain strength and power.

Coach Mike McCarthy's priority is to toughen up his team, but his focus won't be all physical. He'll hold a quarterbacks school to stress fundamentals and work on teaching the rest of the team his version of the West Coast offense.

The Redskins need to sharpen all facets of their passing game and determine whether QB **Jason Campbell** is ready to be Mark Brunell's backup.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, George Henry; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Mike Sando; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

Three's company

The Vikings addressed all three phases of the game with their early free-agent acquisitions. RB **Chester Taylor** (Ravens) is versatile enough to run hard between the tackles and also stretch defenses on the outside. A strong receiver, Taylor could line up as a wideout at times, similar to how the Eagles use RB **Brian Westbrook**. LB **Ben Leber** (Chargers), who still is recovering from a foot injury, is known for his ability to stop the run. He can play all three linebacker positions but likely will land on the strong side. K **Ryan Longwell** (Packers) is reliable and should excel in the Metrodome.

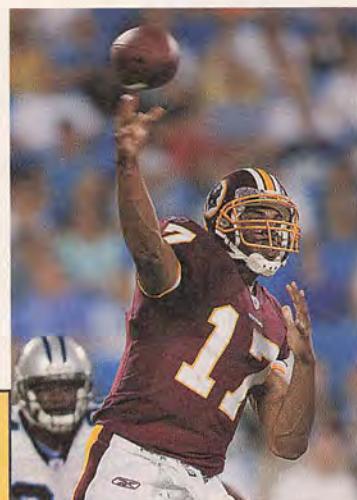


ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

receiver. He caught only 15 passes last season. ... **FALCONS**

DT **Chad Lavalais** must build strength and improve his technique this offseason. His stamina waned as the 2005 season wore on, and he struggled to beat blocks throughout the year. ... The **LIONS** re-signed backup RB **Shawn**

Bryson, a third-down receiving threat, but the coaches still need to find ways to get starter **Kevin Jones** on the field more in passing situations. ... With a new offense-minded coach and likely a new quarterback, this is an ideal time for the **SAINTS'** **Donte' Stallworth** to establish himself as a go-to receiver. Injuries, inconsistency and drops have kept the speedy Stallworth from maximizing his talent in his first four seasons. ... The **BEARS'** **Rashed Davis**, who has been converted from cornerback to wideout, is shifty and could be a good slot receiver. But he must show he has the hands and route-running ability to do the job.



BOB LEVERONE / TSN

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

INSIDER MATT HAYES

mhayes@sportingnews.com



The Big Least? How about the Big Beast? Or, at the very least, an underrated conference on the rise.

Changing the forecast from doom to boom

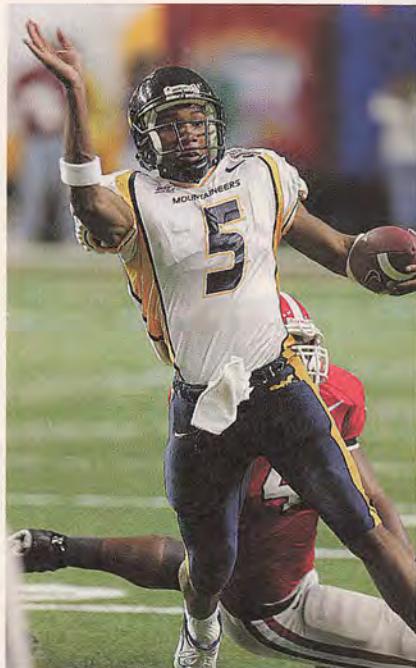
If only he had it in him. If only Big East commissioner Mike Tranghese weren't such a nice guy, such a polished administrator. If only he were someone who'd call a punk a punk.

So while we're all gushing about the big, bad Big East this week as the most entertaining tournament in sports begins, let us reflect on the real madness: Big East football made a huge statement two months ago. And damn near everyone has forgotten about it.

"I'm just not the kind of guy who says I told you so," Tranghese says.

So I'll say it for him, punks. OK, there's one eensy-weensy problem. I, too, was among the football-challenged idiots who said Tranghese, the longtime league commissioner, might as well skulk to the corner, curl up in the fetal position and beg for BCS scraps after the ACC had raided the Big East for its three marquee football teams. Now, two years removed from doomsday, the conference could start next season with two teams in the preseason top 10.

And to think Mountain West Conference commissioner Craig Thompson once had the stones



ROB CARR / AP

With an impact quarterback in White and loads of potential, West Virginia has the national sizzle to keep the Big East cookin'.

to say his conference and the Big East should have a playoff game for the automatic BCS bid.

"It's all about perception," West Virginia coach Rich Rodriguez says.

You can have perception; I'll take reality. Two months ago, WVU brought its battered Big East reputation to the Sugar Bowl to play Georgia. Before Uga VI could yelp, it was 28-0 Mountaineers. The Bulldogs were no slouches, either; they had won the SEC, the nation's best conference, a month earlier by humiliating LSU in the title game. And they were playing WVU only 70 miles from the Georgia

campus in Athens.

Now WVU is the hot team, the trendy pick to play in the national title game. Now Rodriguez is tutoring various coaching staffs in how to run his multi-threat spread option. Now the 'Eers have two Heisman candidates—quarterback Pat White and tailback Steve Slaton—and college football's complete attention.

But that's not all for the little conference that couldn't. There's another team (Louisville) with top 10 potential that is building momentum. Another team with two Heisman candidates (quarterback Brian Brohm and tailback Michael Bush). Another coach (Bob Petrino) who is teaching other staffs about his intricate

passing game.

And I'm not giving up on Pitt. The Panthers have the best facilities in the country, and coach Dave Wannstedt has proved he can recruit with anyone in the Northeast. I still think Wanny will move closer to Pete Carroll than Al Groh on the NFL-to-college list. That's three legitimate championship-caliber programs in a nine-team conference.

I can think of one conference that can boast a better ratio. Yeah, that's right—West Virginia already beat that league's champion in a little bowl game in January.

In case you forgot.

TSN

speedread

Ohio State allowed convicted drug trafficker/kicker Jonathan Skeete to return to the team. Thank God NCAA president Myles Brand took a stance on academic reform.



Virginia Tech's suspension of QB **Ike Whitaker** is a result of the fallout from former QB **Marcus Vick**'s dismissal from the team. Whitaker was arrested earlier this month for possession of alcohol by a minor—which, compared with incidents at other schools, is a relatively slight violation. But because of Vick's sordid past and the embarrassment it caused, coach **Frank Beamer** wasted little time in suspending Whitaker, who many believe could have beaten out **Cory Holt** and **Sean Glennon** for the starting job. Now Whitaker will be fortunate to return to the team by fall camp. ➤ DB **Myron Rolle**, one of the nation's top recruits, continues to impress the staff at Florida State. Rolle enrolled in January and earned six credit hours by passing placement tests—adding to the 20 credit hours he racked up in advanced placement courses during high school. The FSU strength staff believes Rolle could be the best athlete the team has had in more than a decade. ➤ Enough with the rumors LSU QB **JaMarcus Russell** has an attitude problem. He's not throwing this spring because he still is recuperating from torn ligaments in his right wrist. Russell suffered the injury in October against Florida but played the rest of the regular season without telling anyone about it.

Though coach **Les Miles** says the job is open, that's simply motivation for Russell to stay in shape and work over the summer. He clearly is LSU's No. 1 QB when healthy. Peach Bowl offensive MVP **Matt Flynn** is taking most of the snaps this spring while onetime megarecruit **Ryan Perrilloux** still is struggling to learn the offense.

SQUEEZE PLAY

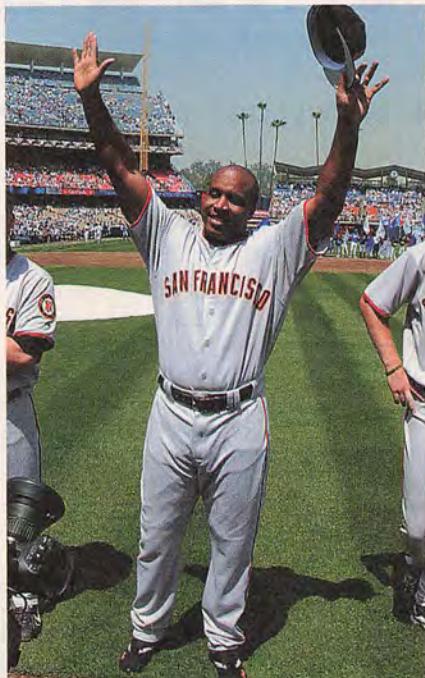
BY BRENDAN ROBERTS

Twelve owners. Twelve different personalities. Twelve different opinions on players.

When it comes to player evaluation, one person's trash can be another's treasure. Even at Fantasy Source, we have disputes about where to take players in our drafts, and there always are some players who create controversy:

Curt Schilling, SP, Red Sox. Will he be a solid starter again? In some leagues, he's being drafted as such (in the fifth or sixth round), but in others he's being cast into purgatory. Most of us agree on this one: He belongs closer to the latter scenario—maybe an 11th- or 12th-round pick in mixed leagues. It's tough for any high-mileage 39-year-old—much less one coming off surgery and a bad season—to be dominant again.

Barry Bonds, OF, Giants. Bonds sparked a spirited debate (imagine that) on the chat board in our mock draft last week. One argument: He'll



be lucky to play 120 games. Another: He's Barry Bonds! Inevitably, someone will be so smitten they'll take him in the fourth or fifth round. Don't be that owner; Bonds carries too much risk for an early-round pick.

Even in fantasy land, you shouldn't gamble on Bonds.

Roger Clemens, SP, free agent. The Rocket could sign with a team or retire, which means an owner could get 27 brilliant starts—or none. Talk about risk. The safe spot to take Clemens would be in the 10th or 11th round, but an owner certainly could justify taking him earlier.

Troy Glaus, 3B, Blue Jays. Thirty-seven homers, 97 RBIs, 29 years old—the numbers speak for themselves, right? Not to many of us. Glaus was considered injury-prone before last season's re-emergence, and he played through numerous injuries, including chronic knee pain, in 2005. Now he is on the artificial turf at Rogers Centre; I predict he'll play no more than 130 games. His numbers suggest he should go early, but the seventh or eighth round seems about right.

To see Fantasy Source's most recent mock draft, go to fantasybaseball.sportingnews.com/baseball.

TSN Games

TIP OF THE WEEK

The name of the game in MLB.com Ultimate Fantasy Baseball is finding bargains so your team's points and market value grow simultaneously. With a salary cap of \$50 million and 14 roster spots to fill, you'll have to be like Theo Epstein, minus the prom dates. But there are some deals to be had.

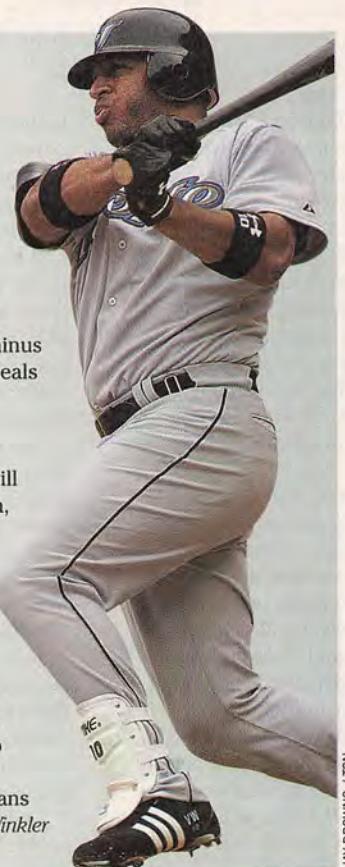
Rickie Weeks, 2B, Brewers. His combination of power and speed is impressive, and his batting average will improve over time. At a weak position, he could be a steal at \$4.83 million.

Vernon Wells, OF, Blue Jays.

Carlos Beltran and Juan Pierre are bigger names, but Wells scored more fantasy points last year and is cheaper (\$5.38 million).

Chad Cordero, RP, Nationals.

Cordero is the least expensive option (\$6.2 million) among last season's top 15 scorers at pitcher. The Nationals' penchant for playing close games means save opportunities galore.—George Winkler



5 IN YOUR FACE

1 Desperate to solve Pedro Martinez's toe woes, the Mets considered a transplant from a cadaver. Unfortunately for them, they were unable to reacquire Scott Erickson.

2 Stuff you'll find at your local dollar store: expired salsa, X-ray glasses, fake poo. What you won't find: the Royals' rotation. According to the Fantasy Source's mixed-league dollar values, there isn't a K.C. starting pitcher worth a buck. Fittingly, however, catcher John Buck is worth \$1.



SEAN GALLAGHER / TSN ARCHIVES

3 King Felix ... Prince Fielder ... Princess Drew.

4 The Red Sox, already with a starting pitching surplus, will find a way to fit Roger Clemens into their rotation right after they find a way to fit David Wells into Bronson Arroyo's uniform.

5 Hey, B.J. Upton: Chuck Knoblauch called. He wants his fielding ability back.

—Chris Bahr

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DAVE KINDRED

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We're bothered and bewildered by Barry Bonds, to say nothing of bewitched.

Game of shadows, shame of distortion

One imagines Barry Bonds at work over a stainless steel cauldron filled with the juices of poisoned entrails, the eye of a newt, the tooth of a wolf. He adds a tablespoon of testosterone decanoate and a drop of Deca-Durabolin. He chants, "Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble. Stanozolol of McGwire, Canseco's HGH, a hell-broth of Palmeiro's trenbolone. Fire burn and cauldron bubble, Babe Ruth, I'm coming after you!"

This time, instead of channeling Paula Abdul, he could wear a witch's dress.

Anyone who loves baseball is at a loss now. Do we laugh, scream in anger, cry? Which is the most apt response to the moral bankruptcy of steroid-inflated players and their enablers? And whom do we blame more, the performance-enhanced players or those management and union executives glorying in a comeback from 1994, the year they killed a World Series?

Chances are it's a tie all around, for these are days of rage and sorrow.

To see Mark

McGwire sit
before
Congress
and
choose
tearful

evasion over truth is to know that players knew that using the stuff was wrong. Until 2002, it was not against MLB's rules, as set by a players union protecting personal privacy and management types turning a blind eye to their employees' cartoonish lean-muscle gain. Not against the rules but wrong, a breach of fair play as agreed to by virtually every other sport.

Now comes real evidence that Bonds, once he saw Jose Canseco shirtless, went to work at his cauldron with an obsession that made Shakespeare's witches look like slackers. "I took my shirt off," Canseco told Keith Olbermann of MSNBC, recounting a home run challenge, "and he said 'Damn, what the hell have you been doing?'" Soon enough, Canseco said, Bonds "had gained about 30 pounds of pure muscle." That season, he hit 73 home runs and broke Mark McGwire's record of 70.

Anecdotes are easily dismissed. Mountains of hard evidence are not. *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams built a mountain on Bonds' drug use: documents, transcripts,

investigators' reports. Perhaps tellingly, Bonds' lawyer has denounced the reporters' methods without denying the allegations in their book, *Game of Shadows*.

Bonds refused comment, but in the past he has downplayed steroids and once suggested sports reporters should pay attention to things much worse than steroids. Alas, the boss did not ask for a column on plague, pestilence, famine or genocide. He wanted Bonds, who at another time said of steroid allegations in a sport with no rules against steroid use, "Man, it's not like this is the Olympics."

Some of us would agree with that last sentence. This is baseball. It's bigger than any Olympics. This is America's game. Distorting its history by distorting the human body is a shameful act for which a price should be paid—and the questions become:

Kick Bonds out of baseball? No.
Suspend him? No.

Replace his number 25 with the scarlet letter "S"? Good idea.

Maybe Congress could call another hearing, this time with Bonds under subpoena. Or maybe MLB could do its own work and rehire Pete Rose's nemesis, dogged investigator John Dowd. At the least, there is a small price Bonds

should pay. As the walking, talking representative of every juiced player of the past decade, he should be ignored. On the day Bonds hits home run No. 714, commissioner Bud Selig should call in sick. No celebration, no ceremony, nothing arranged by the commissioner's office, nothing by Bonds' team or any other team.

If 714 happens in an opponent's ballpark, the paying customers should sit on their hands. The same for 755, 756, only more so.

No hurrahs for the alleged wrongdoer. Instead, moments of silence.

What about the records? Asterisks across the board? No. The intelligent baseball fan—is there another kind?—does not need a reminder of how Bonds' records were made. They know, just as they know Babe Ruth's numbers were made with a rocket ball that his predecessors never put wood to.

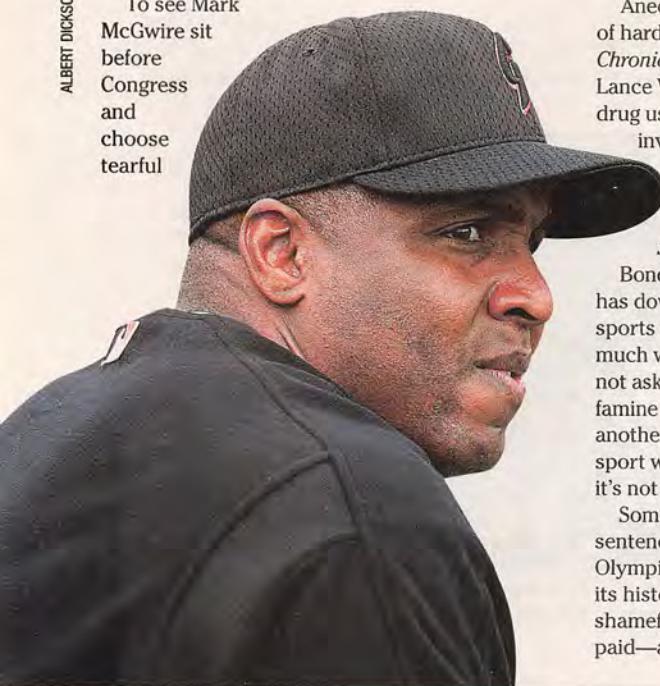
The Hall of Fame? Yes. In his time, under rules governing every player, Bonds was the game's greatest hitter. The Hall's "character" clause gives voters room to say no, and Bonds may yet face criminal charges in drug and tax investigations. Convictions would change everything. But allegations alone do not outweigh achievements, early or late.

Fainaru-Wada and Williams write that before steroids Bonds was "a likely Hall of Famer"—three times the N.L. MVP, 411 home runs in 13 seasons. The seven seasons after steroids, he added four more MVPs and 297 more home runs.

On his plaque at Cooperstown, maybe they could show Bonds stirring a cauldron of magic juices.

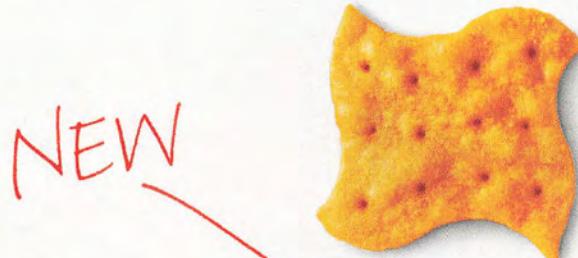
TSN

ALBERT DICKSON / TSN



THE SPORTING NEWS (ISSN 0038-805X) March 24, 2006, Vol. 230, No. 12 is published weekly, except for one week in January and July and semi-weekly during a week in February, April, July, August, September, December and two weeks in March & November by THE SPORTING NEWS, a division of Vulcan Sports Media, Inc., 10176 Corporate Square Drive, Suite 200, St. Louis, MO 63132-2924. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO and additional mailing offices. For subscription service write to THE SPORTING NEWS, P.O. Box 51573, Boulder, CO 80322-1573. Subscription price is \$78.00 for 60 issues. Subscribers in Canada and other countries add \$46.80 per 60 issues. Air Mail rates available on request. Allow six weeks for change of address. Postmaster: Send address changes to THE SPORTING NEWS, P.O. Box 51573, Boulder, CO 80322-1573. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 51573, Boulder, CO 80322-1573. THE SPORTING NEWS assumes no responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts, color negatives or transparencies. COPYRIGHT © 2006 Vulcan Sports Media, Inc., PRINTED IN U.S.A. CANADA GST REGISTRATION NUMBER R-124853730. Publications Mail Agreement Number 40018968. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: BleuChip International, P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6L 6B2. THE SPORTING NEWS is a federally registered trademark of Vulcan Sports Media, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED.

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